RANCH ROMANCES

15¢

SECOND JUNE NUMBER

Cousins of No Kin

By ELSA BARKER

and a novelette by
MAT TOWNSEND

2ND JUNE 1949

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SECOND
JUNE NUMBER

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RANCH ROMANCES

ON SALE EVERY OTHER FRIDAY

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ELTINGE F. WARNER, *President* ELMER J. CHAMBERS, *Treasurer* FANNY ELLSWORTH, *Secretary*

TRAIL DUST

THIS DEPARTMENT will endeavor to cut sign on some of the colorful happenings of today's West and haze the stuff along to you—twentieth century trail dust, stirred up by folks in the cow country.

IN CANADA even thieves respect industriousness. A couple of holdups entered the Winnipeg restaurant of Henry Dong and demanded his money.

"Go away," said Henry. "I'm busy."

The situation was then explained to him more fully, and one of the men indicated that he had a gun in his pocket.

"Quit fooling around and leave," said Henry.

The frustrated robbers obliged him.

AN OPPOSITE point of view was represented in an ad which appeared in an Oklahoma newspaper: ". . . This thriving cafe is for sale because I'm averse to too much work and am 20 years behind in my fishing."

IT'S NOT news when a trick is played on a dude, except when the culprit is himself. A Bostonian, studying at Kansas State college, bought himself a horse and ordered an extra special mail order saddle. When it arrived he cinched it on and climbed aboard. A few minutes later a doctor was treating him for a broken arm and a hip injury. It seems that the saddle was special all right—specially equipped to make the horse buck.

DON'T try to check into the Washington Hotel in Seattle if you've brought along your pet pigeon. Since a recent banquet there when pigeons were loosed and liked the accommodations so well that they stayed for three days, the hotel has a new rule: No live pigeons, either out of cages or out of hats.

EVEN a cow can rise above physical handicaps and climb to the top of her profession. It was two years ago that an Iowa critter broke her right rear leg, and because she represented the best blood lines, her owner wanted to save her unborn calf. The leg was amputated at the hock and a wooden one was rigged for her, but "Crip" is nevertheless one of the top producers in the herd.

A DOLLAR for a haircut is exorbitant, claimed a patron of a Los Angeles barber shop.

The barber shrugged. "You can't go back to the good old days," he said.

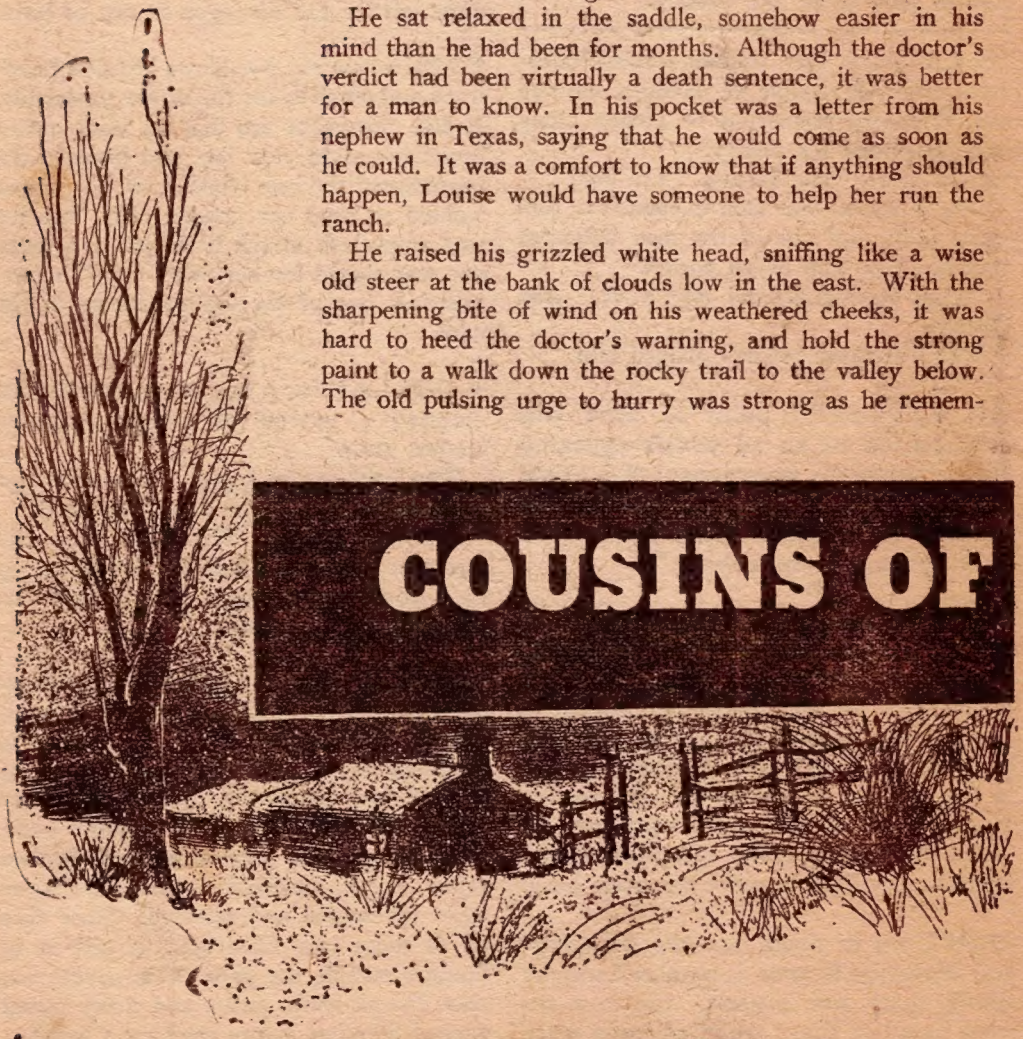
He was wrong. The next time the customer needed a haircut he drove up in a horse and buggy. The barber cut his hair for 75 cents.

THE COYOTE is a canny beast and apparently familiar with the rule of no hunting in Yellowstone Park. According to ranchers, coyotes are using the preserve as a base for operations, staying safe and sound within its limits while eating is good, and coming out to prey on lambs and calves in the winter. To check on this, 319 coyotes were ear-tagged and released. Since then 65 of these tags have been turned in by hunters outside the park. One coyote was shot 115 air-miles away, and many others ranged 50 miles before catching a bullet.

There were two men to comfort her when murder struck.

One was in love with her—the other, a stranger, she trusted

COUSINS OF

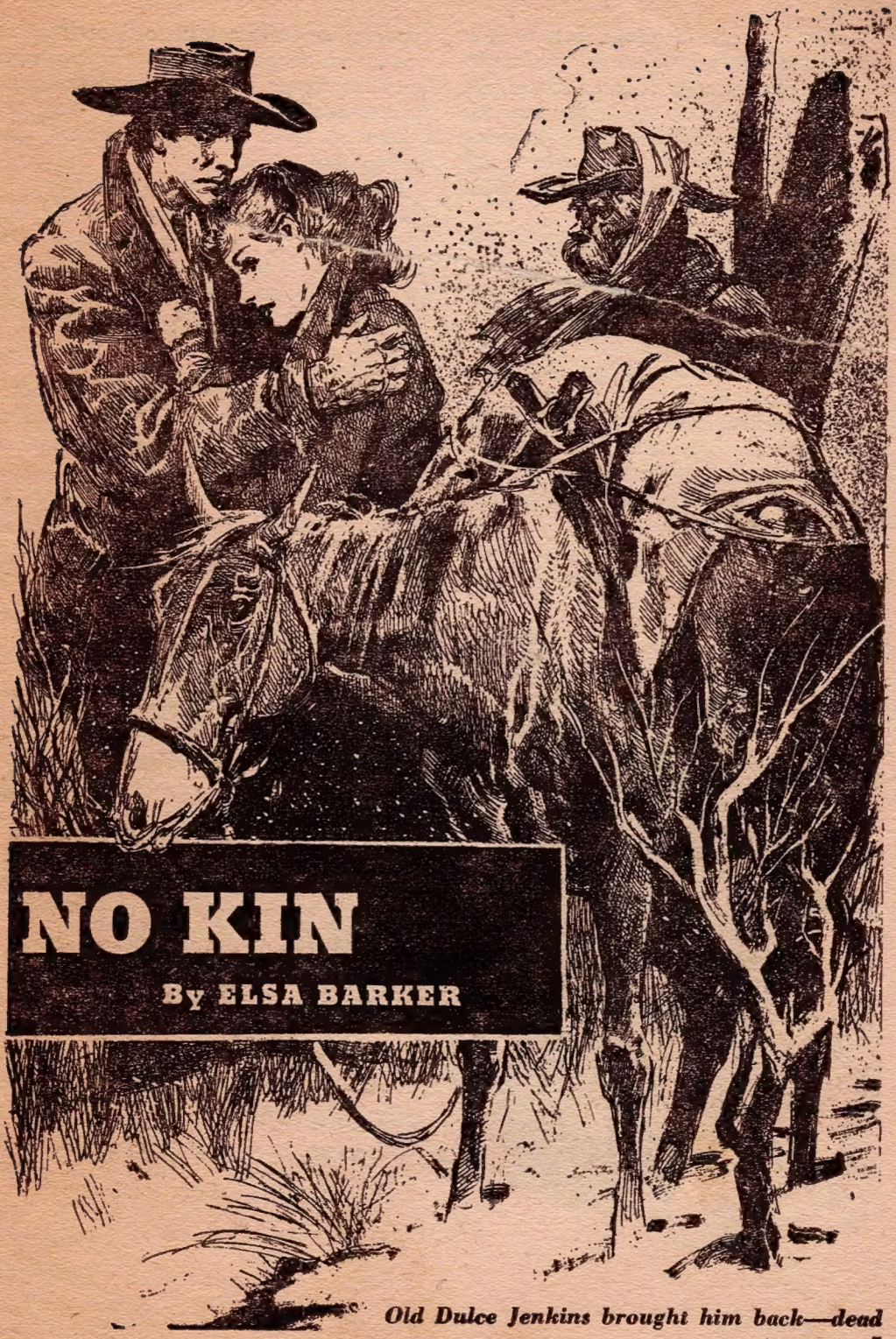


THE OLD MAN pulled up his horse to let the long, red roadster pass on the narrow road. He raised his hand in curt greeting to the slender, dark-haired girl and dark-skinned man behind the wheel. His acquaintance with the Naranjos had never been very cordial.

A mile farther on he stopped for a friendly word with an old trapper-prospector on an aged black mule. He had things to talk about with Dulce Jenkins, but not now. Louise would be waiting dinner for him.

He sat relaxed in the saddle, somehow easier in his mind than he had been for months. Although the doctor's verdict had been virtually a death sentence, it was better for a man to know. In his pocket was a letter from his nephew in Texas, saying that he would come as soon as he could. It was a comfort to know that if anything should happen, Louise would have someone to help her run the ranch.

He raised his grizzled white head, sniffing like a wise old steer at the bank of clouds low in the east. With the sharpening bite of wind on his weathered cheeks, it was hard to heed the doctor's warning, and hold the strong paint to a walk down the rocky trail to the valley below. The old pulsing urge to hurry was strong as he remem-



NO KIN

By ELSA BARKER

Old Dulce Jenkins brought him back—dead

bered the long line of coyote traps to look after before evening chill set in. Ordinarily he would have thought of other chores that had to be done before dark, but now his mind regretfully cast them aside, knowing sensibly that there was nothing he really had to do. He had a good hand in Slim Talley.

In the yard, Slim quit the horse he was shoeing and came toward him, moving fast, as everyone did who worked long on the Bar S.

Louise Stinson stepped out on the back porch, and he saw worry in her brown eyes.

"You're late, Dad."

Newt Stinson smiled affectionately at her. Louise was the only person on the place that he never stormed or shouted at. She was a slender, pretty girl with wide-spaced, dark eyes, and soft red-gold hair.

"I'm sorry, honey," Newt said. He got off slow and easy like the doctor had told him, and handed the reins to Slim. "Turn him in the corral, Slim. I'll ride my trap line after dinner." He turned to the girl. "Seems like I run into purt' near everyone I knew in town today—an' they all had time to stop an' talk."

The girl nodded, smiling.

Inside, the old man popped his gnarled knuckles over the welcome warmth of the kitchen fire. It was not very cold outside, but he felt chilled, with a kind of creeping coldness in the bones that the fire couldn't reach.

"Did you see Dr. Stevens?"

"Yeah." He sounded a little disgusted. "If I'm careful I'll prob'ly live to be a hundred. He give me some powders to take next time the pain hits."

The girl looked relieved. She came to stand by his side, and rubbed her bright head against his sleeve. "That's good news! Oh, I'm so glad. I was worried!"

He put his arm around her. "You look mighty purty. Expectin' company?"

The glance she threw up at him was a little defensive. "Joe Naranjo's coming by. We're going to the football game."

Newt Stinson sighed. He dropped his arm, went over to the kitchen sink and washed his hands.

Louise looked after him. "I won't go if you don't want me to," she said.

He turned, smiling. "You're a good girl, Louise," he said kindly. "I sure don't mean ever to dictate to you, but I don't want to see you hurt. Barring that brother he's got, Joe's a likeable enough sort, but he's just not our kind of folks. I'd hate like hell to see you marry him."

A trace of stubbornness showed around the girl's soft mouth. "I'm not even sure I want to," she said.

Newt dried his hands then stood by the fire again. "I wrote Stan McConnico last week. I got a letter from him this morning. He's coming as soon as he can wind up his business in Texas."

"You mean he's coming to stay?"

"I hope so."

A rebellious look flashed briefly in the girl's eyes. She opened her lips, then closed them quickly without speaking. Old Newt Stinson saw the look.

"It's time I was slacking off a little," he said gently. "If this works out like I hope, he'll take a heap of worry off my shoulders."

"I know," the girl said quickly, but she still looked like she wasn't saying what was in her mind.

The roar of a high-powered motor and the squeal of abrupt brakes stopped her. Both the girl and her father looked relieved at the interruption.

"There's your company," Newt Stinson said.

Joe Naranjo was a handsome man, with smooth, pleasant manners, and the flashing, white-toothed smile of generations of Spanish ancestors. He knew Newt Stinson didn't like him, but there was never any hint of that knowledge in the friendly deference he always showed the old man. Today he brought Louise a box of candy and a brown-wrapped package for Newt, which hes set down carefully on the floor.

"Don't try to eat this, sir," he advised cheerfully.

Newt Stinson frowned. "Sit down, Joe. Have a cup of coffee. Louise ain't quite ready."

Joe Naranjo took the offered chair and refused the coffee. He chin-pointed at the brown package. "Louise told me coyotes have been getting your calves, and you haven't been having much luck trapping them. I brought you some new gadgets to try. We've been using them over on our place and getting good results."

"What are they?"

"Cyanide guns. You stick them in the ground, stick some bait on the trigger, and when a coyote pulls on it a load of cyanide shoots in his mouth."

"Suppose some cow animal steps on one an' springs the trigger?"

Joe Naranjo shrugged. "I suppose it's possible—but not likely. It takes a pull to spring it, and no cow's going to be pulling on stinky bait."

"How about somebody's pet dog?"

"Don't set them too close to the house—and keep your dog at home for a few days."

"I've got a lot of neighbors down toward the pass, an' they've all got dogs."

"You catch them in traps sometimes, don't you?"

The old man nodded. "Sometimes. But I've never killed one. I ride my trap line every day so no animal is ever left in a trap for long. Traps are bad enough. Poison's dirty. I don't like it. You can take the damned stuff back with you!" He sounded definite about it—and a little mad.

Louise cut in quickly. "Come go to the game with us this afternoon, Dad! Let Slim ride your trap line for once. It's getting too cold for you to be out horseback."

Newt Stinson smiled at her, wondering if she knew that getting cold was one of the things he dreaded most these days. But habit was stronger than his dread, or than the doctor's warning. He shook his head.

"No, thanks. It makes my bones ache to sit still so long."

When the young people went out to the car there was a definite cold breeze from the east, and a few flakes of snow floating in with it. Louise started to get in the car, then turned and came back to the porch where old Newt was standing. She reached up and pulled his grizzle-whiskered face down, and rubbed her smooth cheek against it.

"Be sure and wrap up good before you get out in the cold."

He slapped her on the hip. "You run along," he growled. "You act like I was gettin' to be an old man."

Louise laughed. As the car swept out of the yard she turned and waved, not knowing that picture of him standing straight and proud, smiling after her, would be the one she would carry with her always, not knowing that she would never see him alive again.

THE SWELL of piñon and cedar hills began to take on familiarity, but it stirred no pleasure or sense of homecoming in Stan McConnico. He thought longingly of the good job he had left back in Texas, and the friends. He wondered wryly just how far a man's sense of duty to blood kin ought to go. He hadn't wanted to come back, but he had found it impossible to resist the oddly urgent note in his uncle's letter. As he remembered Newt Stinson, he wasn't a man to beg favors unless he was in a tight corner.

The cowboy pulled up beside a small spring in a narrow canyon bottom and got off to get a drink. His horse nickered suddenly and pricked his ears toward a low

rim of rocky ledges flanking the shallow canyon.

Stan saw movement in a clump of cedars, and the next instant heard the staccato crack of a rifle. The hat he had brim-cupped to dip water with jumped out of his hand.

He dived flat for a nearby piñon, but not quick enough. The next bullet ripped across his side just under his left arm. He swore because his sixgun was packed in a roll of clean underwear in his saddle bag. This was no longer supposed to be gun-totin' country.

For a tense five minutes he lay still, feeling the warm sticky blood wetting his side. Finally, when no more shots came, he risked a cautious movement to scan the rocky ledge. Nothing moved. He got to his feet, and crouching low, zigzagged behind piñon and cedar clumps a hundred yards up-canyon. Still nothing stirred on the rimrock. At last satisfied that whoever had shot at him had vanished, he went back to his horse. Blood was still seeping steadily out of the wound in his side, and he felt a strange lassitude creeping through his muscles. He turned his horse toward the Bar S ranch, figuring he still had about five miles to go.

For a while he puzzled over the shot, then remembered that it was hunting season in New Mexico. He didn't think he looked much like a deer, but he knew excited hunters sometimes shot at any kind of movement.

He pondered again at the urgent tone of his uncle's letter, and wondered how Louise was going to like having him around.

Louise wasn't really his cousin. Newt Stinson had been a man in late middle age when he had married the pretty young widow, with a four-year-old daughter. Stan had been just a kid himself at the time, but he remembered a little girl with light, golden hair, a nice kid, a little shy, but full of life and sparkle.

Stan tilted his hat to get the sun out of his eyes, and touched spurs to his horse. A headache started pounding in his temples, and suddenly it seemed a long, long way to the Bar S ranch. He reeled a little in the saddle whenever his horse broke into a trot down hill.

LOUISE STINSON stared with troubled eyes into the popping blaze in the fireplace. Joe Naranjo got up to shove a log tighter to the fire.

"I asked you a question," he said quietly.

"I don't know!"

He turned from the fire with a quick, impatient movement. "You know whether you love me or not!"

"No—I don't even know that!"

He frowned at her. "Damn it, Louise, you just don't make sense! You—"

"Please, Joe! If you've got to have an answer now, it's no. I—I just can't seem to think past Dad's death. There were—" She broke off abruptly, knowing that she couldn't tell him of the suspicions that were adding their burden to her grief.

His eyes softened, and he came to sit beside her on the couch.

"I'm sorry, Louise. It wasn't kind of me to try to hurry you." He gave a short, unhappy laugh. "I guess what's really aching me is that I'm jealous. I know your father built Stan McConnico up as a hero to you, and I've had a feeling that you were stalling me off until you'd seen him!"

The girl flushed. "Don't be silly!" she said sharply. She stood up, moving away from him, for once immune to the strong attraction he had always had for her.

She was more than halfway in love with Joe Naranjo—but she didn't trust him. Maybe that was because she didn't really like Juan and Lita, his brother and sister. As her father had said, Joe just wasn't her kind of folks, and she knew it.

He came from a proud old Spanish family, whose wealth for generations had been almost limitless, but now they had nothing left but their pride, their great, crumbling hacienda and ther taste for gracious living and careless spending. She wondered for a moment if it could be her ranch the Naranjos wanted, but it seemed unlikely that her modest holdings would interest them.

She turned and eyed him as he lounged

against the deep cushions of the couch, considering, as she often had, just how far he obeyed the bossing of his haughty and extravagant family.

"Joe, do you really love me?"

His sleepy-lidded eyes widened; then he got up and crossed to stand in front of her. "I love you, *linda mia!*" The soft way he said it left her no room for doubt that he meant it.

The front door opened and Slim Talley stuck his head in.

"Some young feller just rode up and fell off in my lap. I don't know who he is, but he's been shot. Shall I bring him in?"

"Of course!" Louise hurried to the door.

The cowboy outside was down, but he wasn't quite out. He opened his eyes when the girl came out, seemed to recognize her and tried to smile.

"I'm Stan McConnico," he said thickly. "I—I'm sorry I—"

Even those few words seemed to take all the strength out of him. He leaned against the porch, his chin drooped to his chest. His face under its tan was a greyish white, and his shoulder was soaked with drying blood.

Louise caught her breath with a sharp gasp. She turned to Slim. "You and Joe carry him in. Put him in—in Dad's room."

SHE THOUGHT she had forgotten what Stan McConnico looked like, but now it came to her with a queer little sense of shock that she would have known him anywhere. He had been a boy of ten or twelve then, and now he was a tall, lank man, but even with boyish roundness of feature whittled down to a man's leanness, there was the same jaw, brow and nose, the short cut, crisply curling black hair.

Skillfully the girl cleaned the wound, which seemed to be superficial, while Slim Talley forced a few teaspoonfuls of whiskey between the cowboy's white lips.

By the time the girl had finished dressing the wound, a little color was seeping back into Stan McConnico's drawn face. He opened his eyes and grinned at her faintly.

"I ain't quite fat enough to butcher, am I?"

Louise looked back at him soberly. "Did you have a fight?"

The grin wiped off his lips. His eyes studied her face thoughtfully. He shook his head. "Today's the first time I've set foot in Seco County in fifteen years. The only man I've talked to today—till now—was an old Mexican wood hauler I asked directions of."

Louise Stinson looked startled. "But then why—"

Joe Naranjo said "Oh, God!" softly under his breath.

The girl's eyes swung toward him.

In a few minutes she was back with

Stan McConnico was still watching her. "Could be a deer hunter shot me by mistake," he suggested quietly. "I got off to get a drink at La Ceja creek, and from the rimrock somebody took a pop at me with a rifle."

Slim Talley swore. "It's huntin' season," he agreed. "Some hunter could've mistook you for a buck—seein' what big horns you got. Some hunters shoot at anything that moves!"

"That's right," Joe Naranjo agreed.

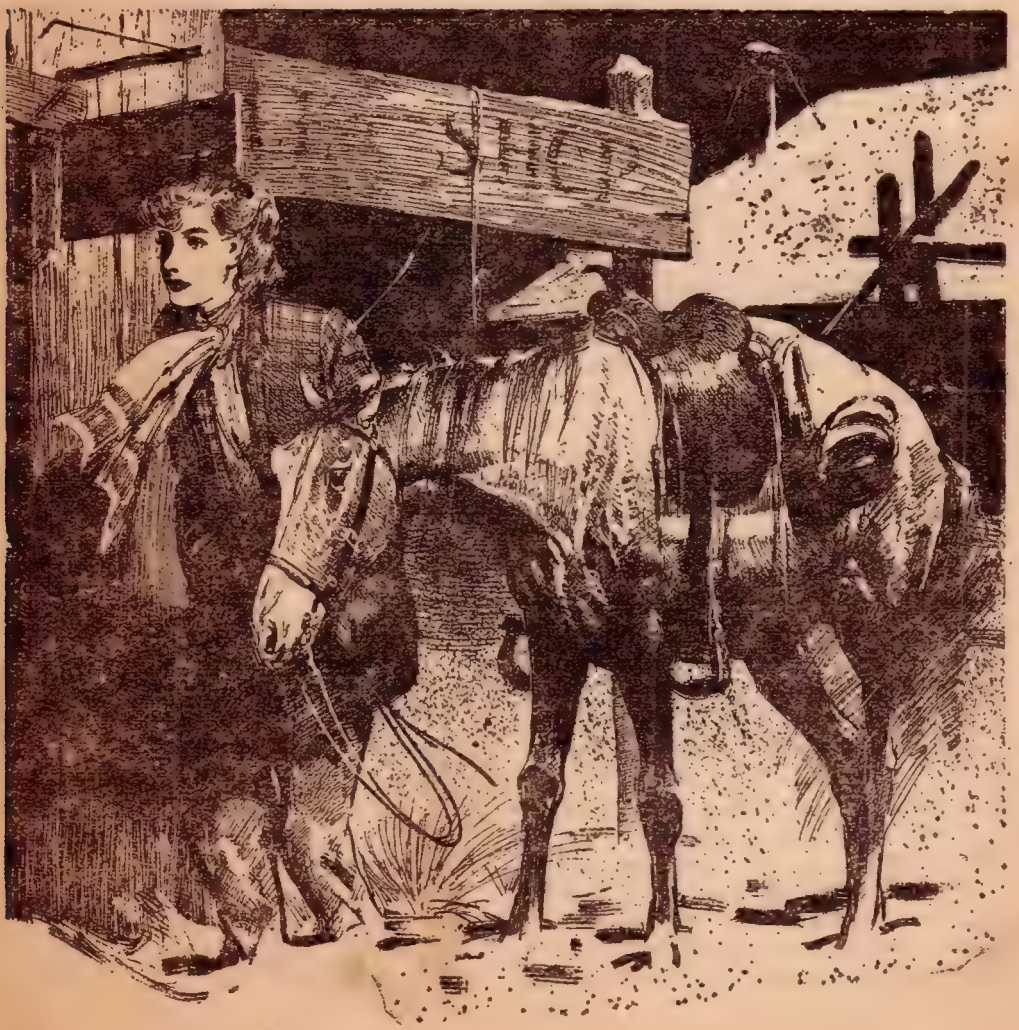
Stan saw the look of relief spread over the girl's tense face. She smiled at him.

"We'll get out now and let you rest," she said.

After the door had closed behind them, Stan shifted his long body under the covers. He felt limp, drained, but his mind was clicking now.

He sensed that something was wrong here. And where was old Newt Stinson? Only three weeks ago he had got the letter urging him to come—saying that he was needed. Yet today no one had mentioned him. This was the bedroom that had always been his uncle's, but now it was cleared of all the old man's personal things.

the horse, throwing anxious looks over her shoulder every few steps



As his eyes traveled around the clean, bare room, Stan guessed then that his uncle was dead. A sense of loss gripped him—a keen regret that he had not come sooner.

An hour later when Louise Stinson opened the door and peeked her head in, she saw that his eyes were closed and that he was sleeping. She closed the door without waking him.

WHEN he awoke, it was daylight again, and big snowflakes were feathering down past his bedroom window. He lay for a minute watching them, thinking that nowhere in the world was the silence so deep as in the mountains during a snowstorm.

Gradually he realized that the silence wasn't so complete after all. From the other end of the long old house he could hear footsteps, and the shuffling of pots and pans on the kitchen stove.

Stan shivered as he threw back the covers and rolled out of bed. His side was stiff and sore, but otherwise he felt fine. Painfully he got his clothes on.

Louise was alone in the kitchen. The two hands had apparently already eaten breakfast but the room was warm and pleasant with the smell of fresh coffee and fried bacon.

"You should have stayed in bed," she scolded him.

"Gosh, I ain't sick!" He got a cup and poured himself some coffee, drinking it black and hot. "Is Uncle Newt dead?"

A shadow fell across the girl's face. "Yes. It was a sort of an accident—ten days ago!"

Stan set the coffee cup down slowly. "What kind of an accident?"

The girl hesitated, then suddenly her face crumpled like a withering rose petal. Tears started rolling down her cheeks. "They—they said it was an accident, but I—I don't see how it could have happened that way!"

He reached his good arm around her. She leaned gratefully against him while sobs shook her shoulders. He let her cry, while the cold suspicion he had gone to sleep with last night took a new dally around his heart.

Presently she raised her head. He handed her a bandana and she wiped her eyes.

"I—I won't do that again, Stan."

"I hope you will if you feel like it. Now tell me what happened."

She drew an unsteady breath. "Coyotes have been bothering the calves a lot this year. Dad put out a trap line and caught some, but not enough. The afternoon he was killed, Joe Naranjo came over and brought him some of the new cyanide guns to try. I'm sure Joe meant well, but—maybe you remember how Dad felt about any kind of poison. A bottle of iodine was the only thing the least bit poisonous he would ever allow on the place. He hated the stuff. Joe tried to argue with him, and Dad got mad and even a little rude about it. Joe and I went to the football game, and when we got back old Dulce Jenkins was bringing Dad home—dead."

Stan grunted.

The girl went on: "He found him with one of those cyanide guns in his hand as if he'd tried to set it, made some mistake and triggered it off in his own face."

"Couldn't you tell whether he'd taken any of the guns with him or not?"

THE GIRL raised her head quickly, then turned away, but not before Stan had seen the shadow of doubt jump into her eyes.

She shook her head. "The package was lying on the floor just as we'd left it. I hadn't counted them, but Joe said there was one gone. I didn't want the awful things around, so Joe took them away."

"Do you know why Uncle Newt sent for me, Louise?" There was a moment of hesitation, then she shook her head. "Not—exactly."

"Do you want me to stay?"

"Oh, yes!" she said softly. "Please do—for a while anyway! I've felt so alone. There wasn't anyone I could talk to. I've even been doubting Slim."

Stan McConnico looked down into her upturned face. Even with the brown eyes tear-drenched and red-rimmed, it was a sweet and piquant face.

He hadn't wanted to come back. He

had even had a feeling of resentment against his uncle for making him feel that it was his duty to come. Now he made a reckless promise.

"I'll stay—as long as you need me."

She gave him a tremulous, grateful smile. Impulsively she reached up, caught his ears, drew his face down and kissed him lightly. Or at least it started out to be a light, grateful, cousinly kiss. Actually it was something quite different. With the dizzy feeling that the floor was suddenly rocking under his feet, Stan dropped his arms. Louise stepped back, looking up at him with a startled expression in her brown eyes. Slow red came up into her cheeks.

"I—I'm—"

Because he still had the shaky feeling inside, Stan's voice came out more flippant than he intended. "I'm glad I came back, *Cousin* Louise!"

The red in the girl's cheeks deepened. "Sit down, Stan," she said. "I'll have your breakfast ready in a minute."

Stan watched the girl as she moved quickly about the kitchen. From her uneasy, still troubled look he guessed that she hadn't told him everything that was worrying her. Already he was half-regretting his rash promise to stay. Louise Stinson was a darned attractive girl—but he didn't want to be attracted. He might not need to stay long, he told himself. The girl, shocked by the suddenness and strangeness of Newt Stinson's death, could be imagining things. When the sharp edge of her grief wore off, she might see different.

That's what he thought until he talked with Slim Talley after breakfast.

Slim was a blond, earnest, middle-aged cowboy. He was slow-talking, maybe even a little slow-thinking, but he wasn't dumb.

"I think the ol' man was murdered," he said flatly. "He hated poison. He wouldn't have touched one of them guns with a ten-foot pole. Besides, the way they're made nobody but a plumb careless damn fool needs to get his face in the way."

"You got any idea who might have done it?"

Slim shook his head.

"Joe Naranjo?"

"No," Slim said definitely. "He was with Louise that afternoon. Besides I'd bet my best boots that Joe ain't the killin' kind. He had reason to hate the old man's guts all right, the way Newt kept herdin' him away from Louise, but I never saw no sign that Joe was mad about it."

"How about the rest of his family?"

SLIM gave him a sharp look. "Maybe you gettin' warmer," he said. "Except for Joe I figger them all to be a hard bunch, but even folks like that got to have a reason for killin'."

"Did they want Joe to marry Louise?"

Slim shrugged. "I never saw much sign of them carin' one way or the other. They like her all right. Everybody likes Louise. She's got a right respectable little ranch here, but as for them killin' the ol' man on the chance of gettin' their hands on Louise's money—that's crazy. Why, even with the price of land and cattle what they are today, she wouldn't have more'n enough to keep them in automobiles and whiskey for a year."

Stan took out papers and tobacco and rolled a smoke. The fingers of his left hand were stiff, and it hurt to move the arm, but it was usable.

"Had Uncle Newt had any trouble lately—fence trouble with his neighbors or anything like that?"

"No, no trouble. He was always a fair and honest man to deal with." Slim hesitated. "Just the same there may be some that hated him. You know how he was—an impatient old devil, with a tongue like a razor's edge. There probably ain't a man within twenty miles that hadn't had words with him one time or another—an' you can't always spot a grudge down deep in a man's mind." He hesitated again. "Like me—f'r instance—Newt gave me hail columbia the day before he was killed for cinch-gallin' a horse. Now I ain't the grudge-holdin' kind—anyhow I had that one comin'—but some men might have felt like killin' for the things he said to me. I can see it's been worryin' Louise. Sometimes I catch her lookin' at me like maybe she ain't quite sure."

Stan looked at the little man's honest, worried face, and *he* was pretty near sure.

"How about Dulce Jenkins? Who is he?"

Slim shrugged. "Just an old trapper-rockhound. I'd say he's all right. Newt liked him. Sheriff Carmody took him in an' questioned him some but couldn't find no reason for holdin' him."

They smoked a few minutes in silence. Slim Talley chin-pointed down toward a long red car creeping over the slick, rough road.

"Looks like Louise's got company comin'," he said, and thumped off toward the barn.

Stan stayed where he was. He crunched out his cigarette, took out the makin's and rolled another. By the time he had it built, the car had stopped by the front gate. The girl behind the wheel was thin-faced and dark. Her black hair hung in a shoulder length bob, and Stan found himself thinking she might be good-looking if someone could just cut half an inch off her nose and paste it on her chin. The man beside her was a well worn and hardened version of Joe Naranjo.

The girl tooted the horn a half a dozen times. When Louise came out on the porch, she swung out of the car and came up the walk to the house. The man followed.

"Hello, darling!" The girl's voice was deep and throaty.

Stan thought Louise's smile of welcome looked strained.

"Hello, Lita," she said quietly. She turned to Stan. "Miss Naranjo—this is my cousin, Stan McConnico. And Juan Naranjo. Joe's brother and sister, Stan."

Lita's black eyes bored into him for a moment, then flicked away, dismissing him as of no importance.

She linked her arm through Louise's. "Darling, grab your toothbrush, and your long wool underwear. We're going places."

"I'm sorry, Lita. I couldn't possibly go anywhere. I—"

"Don't be silly, darling. Of course you can. Listen, here's what we're going to do! We're going hunting, with a pack train, up to Bear Mountain and camp out. You won't have to bring anything but some fresh clothes. We've got down sleeping bags, air mattresses, and everything. Joe's getting things ready."

FOR A pint-sized gal she was certainly aggressive. Talking a mile a minute, arms still linked, she was moving Louise toward the door, not leaving much chance for protests.

But Louise had some iron in her gizzard too. At the door she stopped, freed herself from the propelling arm, and shook her head.

"No, Lita!" She was polite, and her voice stayed soft, but there was no doubting she meant it. "I'm sorry. It sounds like fun, but I just can't go."

Stan McConnico blew a cloud of smoke toward the porch ceiling and grinned up at it.

"Why don't you go, Louise? We can get along fine without you for a few days." He looked from one Naranjo to the other: "You see I'm going to be around for quite a spell. Uncle Newt wrote me to come home, sayin' he wasn't feelin' well, an' if I'd come an' take charge here, he'd write me in his will for a half-interest in the place. I don't know whether he ever got around to doin' that, but I reckon Louise an' I can come to some sort of agreement about it, since I've still got Uncle Newt's letter to prove I ain't a liar." He took another puff on his cigarette and added: "Of course I'm the only blood relative the old man had. I don't know if he ever actually got around to adopting Louise. If he didn't, of course, I've got a legal claim to the whole ranch."

He was sounding like a heel, hoping he'd make Louise want to go away. It was a desperate bid for a little time to look around. She was staring at him, a hurt look growing in the brown eyes.

Juan Naranjo turned to Louise. "Shall I kick him off the place for you?"

The girl's eyes moved away from Stan's face with a look of anger. "No," she said. "Please, Juan—no more trouble now. He has a right to stay, if he wants to."

Juan Naranjo didn't seem to have much trouble controlling his urge for violence. "All right, honey," he said to Louise. "You know we just want to help you any way we can."

Louise shrugged. "I think I'll go with you after all."

Stan had a moment of sick panic that maybe he'd done the wrong thing. He'd figured he had to start casting bait somewhere, and the Naranjos seemed as good a place to start as any. But it was wrong if it drove Louise on a wave of impulsive anger to run away and marry Joe Naranjo. He didn't think she would, but he was scared. He didn't want the damned ranch or any part of it. He knew very well that Newt Stinson had legally adopted the girl the week he married her mother. Very likely the Naranjos knew it too. So they wouldn't be worried about him having any claim to the place.

Anyway he was going to feel a lot freer to move around if the Naranjos didn't think Joe had any real competition for Louise Stinson's hand—and ranch. He didn't want to get shot by mistake for a deer again.

Lita had turned her back on him. "I'll help you get your things ready, Louise."

This time Louise let herself be led in the house. Juan lighted a cigarette. He squinted at Stan through a haze of smoke.

"You're a stupid idiot!" he said, then turned on his heel, and went out to the car.

"Maybe," Stan said softly. "Maybe so."

One cigarette later the girls came outside again, Louise carrying a small overnight bag. As she passed Stan, she stopped and gave him a quick look as if about to speak. Lita tugged at her arm.

"Come on, darling!"

Stan watched the car roll out of the yard, got up and went out to the stable where Slim Talley was forking out manure. "Let's you an' me saddle us a couple of nags an' take a pasear."

IT HAD been a long time since Stan had seen this country, but as they rode it began to look familiar. Slim pointed out a strip of hill and pocketed vega land that Newt Stinson had bought from the Naranjos ten years before.

Stan pricked up his ears. "There wasn't any trouble about the title—or over boundaries—anything like that?"

Slim shook his head. "Not that I know of." He grinned dryly. "An' I'd have heard about it, if there had been."

From up on a high point on a rocky ridge Stan looked across at a series of other ridges and rocky canyons that fanned out into a wide green vega below.

"Beginning here," Slim told him, "is the land Newt bought from the Naranjos. And this section was where Newt had his trap line. Just over yonder—the second little ridge—is where Dulce found him that night. Want to ride over there?"

Stan shook his head. "Not now. Where does Dulce Jenkins live?"

Slim pointed to where a wisp of blue smoke was rising beyond one of the ridges.

"On Newt's land?"

Slim gave him a quick look. "Sure," he said. "But don't get excited about that. His old mule don't eat much grass, an' he never bothered nobody. Newt was good to folks like that."

They eased their horses down off the ridge and continued the ride. With Stan in the lead they scouted slowly up and down the draws and ridge tops, spending most of their time on the strip of land that had once belonged to the Naranjos. It was late when they finally rode in home to a dark and cold house.

The next day Stan rode alone—over to the little shack old Dulce Jenkins had built in Little Seep Canyon. The cabin was built pack rat style, from scraps of old lumber, tin cans, and logs that Jenkins had picked up for nothing. Fifty yards below the house the tiny trickle of spring that gave the canyon its name seeped up in the narrow trail, making a deep mud puddle.

The old trapper came to the door as Stan's horse plowed through the puddle. His ragged clothes were the same kind of horge-podge as the house, but he wasn't dirty and Stan thought that the whiskery old face looked intelligent. His smile showed two rows of surprisingly white teeth.

"The coffee pot's on. Light an' have a cup."

"Thanks," said Stan, and stepped off his horse. "My name's Stan McConnico. I'm Newt Stinson's nephew."

The old man gave him a long look. "I suppose you want to hear about how I happened to find him?"

"Slim Talley's already told me, but I'd like to back-track on it some."

AGAIN the shrewd blue eyes appraised him. "Newt was my friend," the old trapper said quietly. "Come in. I'll tell you what I can."

Inside the cabin the tiny old stove was bursting at the seams with a roaring fire. The top was red all over, and flame belched through a dozen cracks in the stove's old body.

It was too warm inside. The air was heavy and stale with the acrid smell of raw hides of various ages and stages of cure or decay. Wherever there weren't hides, there were rocks of all sizes, and most any color.

The old trapper propped the door open a few inches and let a wave of fresh air in. He grinned at Stan. "I'm used to the smell of skins. Sometimes I kinda forget that other folks don't like it."

He shoved ore samples off one corner of the table, set out two tin cups and poured sizzling coffee.

Stan sat down on a half-empty cement sack, picked up one of the rocks and held it to the light. One side was a dark, shiny, metallic stuff that might have been lead or silver, the rest of the stone seemed to be made of tiny amethyst crystals.

"You find this around here some place?"

The old man shook his head. "No. I got that years ago, from one of the old silver mines at Creede. Wherever you find amethyst you're likely to find silver, too. The amethyst is purty, but it ain't worth much." He picked up another rock from a heap in one corner of the small room. "Now if you're interested in minerals, here's one. . . ."

It was the beginning of a long, and to Stan, very interesting, talk on mines and mining. The old man had been around, and he'd kept his eyes and ears open. In the old days, he said, prospectors had looked mainly for a strike of gold or silver. Nowadays, there were all sorts of new minerals needed, some of them very valuable. And he had a piece of rock with a trace of nearly every mineral named.

Finally the old man stopped. "You came to ask me about Newt," he reminded Stan.

The cowboy shook his head. "I come to talk about this stuff," he said. "Did any of this ore come from Uncle Newt's Bar S land?"

"Yeah," said Dulce Jenkins. He scratched his thatch of grizzled hair and seemed to hesitate. Finally he picked up a large, pretty rock, mottled grey and brick red, hard, shiny, almost like marble. "This is the best thing I've found so far. It's potash—high grade. If there's a big vein running through the mountain it's worth a fortune. It comes from the wash just this side of the Big Bald Point."

He stopped and smiled wryly. "Of course, I'm rock crazy. I know that. I've found things that looked good a dozen times before—I keep tellin' myself that—an' none of them ever panned out. But when I showed this to Newt a couple of weeks ago, he was interested, an' offered to grub-stake me. If I found anything worth while, I was to get half." He got up and from the rock pile sorted out half a dozen smaller pieces of the same red rock and laid them on the table in front of Stan.

"I just wanted to show you this, son," he said quietly, "an' tell you that Newt was one of the best friends I ever had. If you got any idea of lookin' for the man that killed him, I'll help you anyway I can."

Stan looked at the old face, the bright blue eyes, and remembered what Slim Talley had said—that no man could ever be really sure what might be festering in another man's heart. But he would almost have staked his own life that a greedy and murderous soul had not sculptored the kindly lines around Dulce Jenkins fine eyes.

"You sound like you already got some ideas," he said.

The old man tapped the little pile of red

and grey rocks with a blunt, gnarled forefinger.

"These. I didn't find them together, but there's too many of them for it not to mean something."

STAN began to wonder if the old man's mind was running in the same direction as his own.

"I hear things in town," the old man said softly. "I know that Juan and Lita Naranjo are dead-set for Joe to marry Louise Stinson. Newt was against it—and would likely have kept her from it if he had lived. The Big Bald hill used to be on Naranjo land. Lita's had a fancy big rock garden that she's mighty proud of for years. They throw a heap of fancy parties—for folks from everywhere. It'd be natural for them to have learned that pretty rocks like these could lead to millions. You take it from there, son."

"I aim to," Stan said quietly. "How much of a grubstake do you need to go on with your prospecting?"

"Newt already loaned me all I'll need. I'm ready to start diggin' if it's all right with you and Louise."

Stan hesitated. "You've got a sixgun?"

"No. But I'm mighty handy with my old rifle. I've had sixty years of practice."

"You're not afraid?"

The old man just grinned.

Stan picked up a good sample of the potash ore. "Mind if I borrow this a few days?"

"Take all you want." Dulce came around the table and touched the cowboy's bandaged arm. "Mind you keep your eyes peeled. The strangest accidents happen around here—like some fool hunter shootin' you for a deer the other day, an' ol' Newt lettin' his hand slip an' shootin' a load of cyanide in his own face. We could be takin' on a rough crowd, son."

"I'm kinda rough myself sometimes," Stan said mildly. "The huntin' season closed yesterday—that's one excuse they can't use again."

Stan rode away with the good warm feeling that he had found an ally who could put in some licks that really counted.

That afternoon Stan visited, briefly, Newt Stinson's three nearest neighbors. He brought the talk around to his uncle's death, learned that all of them had accepted without question the sheriff's verdict of accidental death. All three men had at one time or another had sharp words with Newt Stinson, but as far as Stan could learn none of them had ever borne him any serious ill will. Rather they had all

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Coming up in the next issue

GOLD IN THE BUSH

Cole Barrows Had Reason to Curse and Bless the Money He Carried, for Though the Money Drew Road Agents to His Trail the Road Agents Brought a Girl

A Novel

By FRANK C. ROBERTSON

accepted him as he was—short-tempered, sharp-tongued, but for all that a mighty good neighbor, and a fair man to deal with.

It was dusk when Stan reached the rim-rock mesa above the Bar S. What had been only a suspicion a couple of days before had now hardened into certain conviction.

It all dovetailed too neatly for anyone but the Naranjos to have done it—Joe Naranjo bringing the cyanide guns for the old man to try out . . . Joe taking them away with him so that no one could say for sure whether Newt Stinson had really taken one to try or not . . . the convenient use of the snow storm to cover all tracks.

Gentle-speaking, dark-eyed Joe Naranjo, whether he'd had a hand in the planning or not, evidently had covered for his brother. Stan wondered how bad that was going to hurt Louise when she found out.

DOWN below he saw lights switch on as a car crept up the valley road. His heart quickened with pleasure as he thought that Louise might be coming back.

He spurred his pony down the trail at a quick, sliding trot. The Naranjos' red roadster was already parked by the kitchen door when he rode into the yard, and lights were coming on cheerily as kerosene lamps were lighted.

Through the kitchen window he could see the figures of two men standing with hands in their pockets, letting Louise shake down the stove and start the fire. Lita was not there.

He turned his horse into the corral. From the lunch bag tied behind the saddle he got the pretty red and grey rock and carried it to the house.

Louise was still busy with the stove. She straightened and gave Stan a sober, probing look, then turned back to the stove without speaking.

Stan took the poker out of her hand. "I never yet saw a woman that could wrassle a wood stove!" He smiled down at her. "I'm glad you're back, honey!" He said it softly, and let his voice carry everything he felt.

He saw the brown eyes blink with a look of surprise. A hint of color came up into her cheeks. After a moment she turned away abruptly, still without speaking to him.

"Getting tired of your own cooking, McConnico?" Juan Naranjo asked with soft malice.

Stan rattled the old stove as he shook ashes out of the grate. He watched the flames begin to lick eagerly up around the wood. He warmed his hands for a moment, then turned to face the other three. He saw that both the Naranjos were eyeing the rock he laid on the table.

"This stove's a dinger compared to the one ol' Dulce Jenkins has in his cabin," he said, hoping he sounded casual about it. "You ought to see it, Louise. The ol' booger has patched it together with old tin cans. It belches fire at every seam. Some day he's going to burn that rat's nest down on top of him."

"I know it," the girl said soberly. "And with him asleep in it. He builds up a big fire every night before he goes to bed. I offered to give him more bedding, but he's proud as the dickens!"

JUAN NARANJO pulled his eyes away from the rock on the table. "You've been over to Jenkins' cabin?" he asked.

"Yeah, talkin' minin' all day," Stan said blandly. He picked up the rock and handed it to Louise. "You like pretty rocks? Dulce gave me this one. He's got a batch more that he found up around Bald Point Hill. He thinks they've got some valuable mineral in them, an' I'm going to send one in to the assay office for him."

"It's pretty," the girl said quietly.

Stan was trying to think it through fast—how much to tell now, how much to hold back. It was not the time for an out and out accusation, but he wanted Louise to hear enough so that if his plans went wrong she would think back and remember—and distrust the Naranjos.

"Dulce had showed this to Uncle Newt," he said quietly. "Uncle Newt was interested. He promised Dulce a half-interest if anything came of it."

"What is it?"

"Potash."

The girl set the rock on the table. Stan saw that her hand was shaking and her face had paled. He knew now that her fears and suspicious tracked with his own. As long as there was no motive, she could hold fast to the belief that Joe Naranjo could have had no hand in plotting the murder of her father. Now she must see how it all dovetailed.

"Stan—I—"

The lights of another car turning into the yard flashed across the kitchen window.

Joe Naranjo picked up his hat. "We'd better be going," he said abruptly. He stepped close to Louise, put a hand under her chin. "I hate to leave you here. I wish you'd stayed with us a while longer."

The girl moved his hand away, but, with a sudden, fiercely jealous pang, Stan saw that she did it gently, not in anger or disgust.

"This is my home," she said quietly.

A loud knock sounded at the front door. She half-turned as if to go answer it, then stopped. She looked at Stan, and he knew she was afraid to leave the three men alone together.

"Will you go, Stan?"

"Sure."

As Stan swung the front door open, the lamplight revealed a portly man in a heavy jacket, with a star pinned conspicuously on its front. With him was a slender, pretty, dark-haired girl in a shabby grey coat. She was shivering as if cold.

The sheriff spoke first. "I'm looking for a man named Stan McConnico," he said.

"I'm—"

The girl interrupted with a soft, anguished little cry. She came through the door with a rush, threw her arms around the cowboy, and buried her face tight against his shoulder.

"Stan! Oh—Stan, darling! I—I hope you won't be mad at me! I—I just couldn't help—" Her words came out muffled and jumbled, then broke off into sobbing.

For one paralyzed moment the cowboy stood still. Abruptly, and not very gently, he disentangled the clinging arms from his neck and stepped back.

"I never saw you before in my life," he said sharply.

She gasped. Her full, soft lips quivered. "Stan! Stan, please! I—"

She dropped into a chair and bent her face over into her hands, her shoulders shaking with sobs.

The sheriff cleared his throat.

"I'm here to arrest you on a charge of wife and child desertion, McConnico," he said sharply. "An' I want to add—that never in my life have I taken greater pleasure in making an arrest. Of all the dirty lowdown skunks I've ever met—a man that will desert a sick wife with a baby an' steal her life's savings to boot is about the lowest I've ever come acrost!"

BEHIND him Stan heard a gasp, and knew Louise Stinson had come into the room after him. He whirled and caught the girl by the shoulders.

"Louise, listen! It's a damned lie! I never saw this girl before in my life! You've got to believe me! I—I—" He broke off at the fury in the girl's eyes.

"Don't you touch me!" she said furiously. "Don't you ever *dare*!"

She crossed the room, and laid a gentle hand on the other girl's shoulder. The girl looked up. Louise dropped her hand. For a moment the two girls eyed each other, then with a sudden abrupt movement the dark-haired girl stood up, half turning her back on Louise, facing the sheriff.

"Let's go!" she said sharply. "If he doesn't want to have anything more to do with *me*, all right. But you'll pay me back every cent you stole from me and my father, Stan McConnico, or I'll see that you rot in jail for the rest of your life!"

Sheriff Carmody's hard eyes raked over the cowboy. "Come on!" he said sharply. "Or are you goin' to make me do this the hard way?"

"The hard way!" Stan said.

He was standing with thumbs hooked over his belt, the fingers of his right hand splayed near the butt of his gun. The sheriff hesitated. With one hand at her

throat, Louise Stinson's eyes swung from one man to the other.

Stan knew he could eventually prove that he had never known this girl, but in the meantime he would be in jail. He knew no one who would go bail for him, and while he was sweating out his impatience in a lonely cell, Joe Naranjo would be taking advantage of Louise's distressed doubts to urge her to marry him.

And old Dulce Jenkins. . . . A cold shiver of dread crawled over him as he thought of the old man. Brashly he had given the old man's hand away. He had boasted of the potash discovery. He had told them about the old stove that was apt to burn the isolated, lonely cabin down and Louise had innocently backed him up. He had given them the ready-made ingredients for another "accident," and if he let the sheriff slap him in jail there was nothing he could do about it.

Stan moved fast. His gun came out covering the sheriff. He took a quick step backward—another. His foot went back reaching for the door at his back to close it before the Naranjos could swarm in from the kitchen. The door swung back halfway, then recoiled against a human body barging through.

Stan jumped sideways to put the solid wall at his back. For a moment his aim was off the sheriff, and in that moment the sheriff jumped.

The sheriff's flying tackle hit him hard against the knees, and he tumbled on top of the sheriff.

"Louise, go tell Dulee—"

Juan Naranjo's gun butt caught him a sharp blow on the side of the head. With a grunt he crumpled into unconsciousness.

HE CAME to lying on a hard, narrow cot. His head ached sickeningly. There was such total blackness around him that for a moment he had the terrifying sensation of being blind. Then he realized that he was in an unlighted cell.

He stood up, fighting off the dizziness that seized him. He felt around the narrow walls until he reached the narrow, barred window. A shade was drawn over it. When he let it up, a flicker of pale moonlight seeped in. Even that much light made him feel better.

Somewhere up front a door opened and he heard voices. One of them belonged to Louise Stinson, and Stan thought she was talking unusually loudly.

"He was hurt bad, Dr. Stevens. Juan knocked him unconscious with his gun barrel. He may have brain concussion. He may be dead. And Sheriff Carmody just brought him here and dumped him without a doctor or anything!"

"Take it easy, Louise," the strange man's voice was matter-of-fact. "He's probably all right—but if he looks bad I'll move him over to the hospital."

"You can't do that!" the sheriff protested. "Shucks! He ain't hurt! I've brought lotsa men in thataway, an' never had no doctor. Never had no trouble, neither!"

"You're lucky!" the doctor said sharply. "Don't you know this man or his family could sue the pants off of you if you left him unattended here tonight?"

Stan wondered whether the doctor's voice was normally that loud either. He tiptoed back to his bunk, lay down and closed his eyes.

A hospital room would be easier to get out of than this tiny concrete cell. He didn't know whether he could fool the doctor or not. The lump on his head felt as big as a turkey egg, his face was stiff with dried blood, and from the sickening pounding in his head, plus the nausea in his stomach, he guessed that he would look pale enough.

The lock on the cell door clicked, and through closed eyelids he sensed bright lights. He groaned. Louise Stinson was suddenly at his side, kneeling by the cot. He opened his eyes, rolled them wildly, and groaned again.

"Oh, Stan!" Her distress sounded genuine.

He wanted to tell her he was all right, but he didn't dare.

The doctor moved her aside. His hands taking the cowboy's pulse, feeling of the

lump on the head, were swift, gentle and sure. The examination didn't take near as long as Stan thought it ought.

"This man's got to be moved to the hospital, tonight," the doctor said crisply. "I don't know whether there's any concussion or not. But I want to have him where I can watch him."

"But I can't—" The sheriff started to protest.

"Do you want to take the responsibility of holding him here if he dies?" The doctor's voice was curt.

"All right," the sheriff shrugged finally. "Do what you think is best."

"Louise has her pick-up outside. We'll move him in that."

Stan lay quiet with his eyes closed while they carried the cot out and lifted it into the truck. Then while the sheriff and the doctor stood for a moment on the sidewalk talking in low voices, Louise climbed up into the truck and pulled a blanket over the cowboy.

He reached out and caught her hand. She dropped to her knees by the cot. "Stan, are you all right?"

"Yes. I—"

"Ssh!" Her lips were close to his ear and for a moment her fingers tightened on his hand. Then she straightened.

"Will you drive, Dr. Stevens? I'll stay here and hold the cot from jolting."

As the truck rolled slowly down the street, Stan started to sit up but the girl's hands against his chest pushed him back.

"Lie down!"

"I'm not going to the hospital! I've got to—"

"Hush! We're driving down there to let Dr. Stevens out. Then I'm taking you to the ranch."

Stan thought they had gotten away with that a little too easy.

The street lights in the town were on everywhere. By them Stan saw an uneasy look on the girl's face.

"The girl's been talking all over town this afternoon," Louise said quietly. "I followed the sheriff in in the truck and heard what folks are saying. There's talk of a tar-and-feather party tonight. The sheriff knows it. That's why he was glad enough to let the doctor take you away."

She stopped, then laid her cold, slim fingers on Stan's hand again. "Stan, Dr. Stevens is sticking his neck out for me—and you. I'd like to know it's all right. You told me once before tonight—and I didn't believe you then—is that girl your wife?"

"No," Stan said flatly. "I never saw her before in my life."

The truck had pulled around behind the hospital away from the street lights. The girl gave his hand a brief little squeeze, then jumped out. The doctor didn't look much surprised when he saw Stan sitting up.

"You put on a good show," he said. "How do you feel?"

"All right. I won't forget this, Doctor."

The doctor held out his hand. "I was a friend of Newt's," he said simply. "Besides—I don't like mobs."

He turned then to the girl. "Good night, Louise. Be careful." He disappeared into the hospital.

WEAK and shaky, Stan climbed slowly out of the truck bed. He was stiff and sore all over, his head ached, and his stomach was surging like an ocean wave.

"Where's the livery stable?"

The girl looked up at him. "You—you didn't plan to go away, did you?"

He shook his head, impatient that she seemed to be arguing with him.

"I've got to go warn Dulce Jenkins! It's quicker over the hill horseback than to ride out to the ranch and get a horse there."

As if she had long ago learned to recognize the tone in a man's voice when his mind was made up, she said sharply, "Get in! Slim Talley is in town. I'll borrow his horse and take Slim home in the truck You keep out of sight."

She drove the pickup a couple of blocks, then parked it in a dark alley. In a few minutes she was back leading the horse, walking fast, throwing an anxious look over her shoulder every few steps.

"You'd better hurry, Stan. There were some men in front of the Casino Bar. They didn't try to stop me, but somebody might get curious."

The cowboy stepped into the saddle. The stirrups were way too short, but there wasn't time to change them now. The girl kept a hand on the rein for a second.

"You'll come back to the ranch tonight —after you see Dulce?"

He shook his head. "Probably not tonight. Maybe not for several days." Then he leaned in the saddle and put a hand lightly on the hair that seemed to shine even in the pale moonlight. "Trust me, Louise. I—I didn't mean a damn word I said the other day!"

"I'm going to trust you, Stan—whether I do or not!"

The next moment he was gone, riding through the dark alley, skirting the fringes of town.

Louise put cold hands to her hot cheeks, and tried to think. She hadn't told Stan that Juan Naranjo was one of those men in front of the Bar. It wouldn't take Juan long to figure for whom she had taken the horse, and start checking with the sheriff.

She knew she had seen that girl who claimed she was Stan's wife somewhere before. The funny way the girl had ducked her head when she saw Louise had been a dead giveaway that the recognition was mutual. Then in a sudden flash she had the answer.

LOUISE hurried back into the brightly lighted street. The group of milling men in front of the saloon had increased to a dozen now, and the mumble of their voices sounded angry. The girl caught her breath. There was mob trouble brewing all right. Her eyes searched for Juan Naranjo. She saw him, half a block ahead of her, walking toward the sheriff's house.

"Juan! Wait a minute! I want to talk to you!"

He whirled at the sound of her voice, then smiled and turned back to meet her. "What's the matter, honey?" It was amazing how such a hard-faced man could speak so softly. "Can I take you home? There's a lot of drunks in town tonight. You oughtn't to be out by yourself."

The girl shook her head. "I'm worried —and I'm mad too. Juan—that was a frame-up against Stan, and you know it. That girl who pretended to be his wife—I saw her with *you* at the Fiesta last year, when she was supposed to have been Stan's wife clear down in Brady, Texas! About the time she was supposed to be having a baby!"

She heard Juan Naranjo swear softly under his breath. She pushed his hand off her arm and waited.

"All right," he shrugged finally. "I admit it."

"Why?"

Juan said a Spanish swear word. "You little fool! Joe loves you—that's why! And Joe's *my brother*! Your father never made any bones about the fact that he intended for you to marry McConnico if he could fix it. So now McConnico shows up, smug, good-looking, all set to take charge and help you run the ranch. I guess it was pretty dirty, but I couldn't help wanting to help Joe out. You'd kept him eating his heart out a long time. Joe didn't have anything to do with it. It was all my idea—and Lita's."

"Did you shoot Stan the day he came?"

"No!"

"Did you kill my father?"

"Hell! Of course not!"

After what she had just heard him admit, Louise couldn't quite swallow the denial, but she didn't press it further.

"Juan—" she swallowed from sheer nervousness— "I won't keep Joe waiting any longer. I don't love him—and I don't like his family. If there *is* a million dollars in potash on my place, the Naranjos will never get a cent of it. I'm *not* going to marry Joe! Do you understand?"

He looked at her soberly, and what was behind his suave, dark face, she couldn't tell.

"I'm sorry as hell for Joe," he said. "It sure looks like we've muddled up his chances—when we only wanted to help him. We Naranjos don't want your damned

ranch! Besides that potash story just sounds like one of McConnico's big windies to me."

He laid a hand on her arm again. "Lita's at the hotel now. I'm not trying to change your mind—if you've got it made up—I just want you to come talk to her."

Louise started to say no, but she remembered that as long as she could keep him and Lita here arguing with her, the less chance any mob would have of catching Stan.

Lita was in the hotel lobby flirting casually with a traveling salesman. She had on riding jeans, a plaid wool shirt, and a short fur jacket thrown over her shoulders. She came toward Louise smiling, almost as if she had been expecting her. It made Louise feel uneasier than ever.

UP ON the hillside above the ramshackle cabin Stan and old Dulce Jenkins shivered with the cold. The cowboy wasn't dressed for lying out in near freezing weather, and they hadn't dared bring more than one of the ragged blankets from the cot in the cabin. They couldn't build a fire, they couldn't smoke, they didn't even dare talk, except in occasional low whispers. They huddled close together, under their one blanket, watching a pale sliver of moon sink in the west.

Then suddenly through the darkness he could hear the thud of horses' hoofs coming at a swift trot. He heard them slop through the mud puddle in the trail below Little Seep Canyon.

The old man jerked upright. After a moment he whispered, "Two of 'em!"

Stan nodded.

He forgot how cold he was, as his ears strained through the dark. He couldn't see anything, but he heard the horses stop close to the cabin.

Stan itched to go busting down the hill and catch them red-handed. But his escape from jail had not supplied him with a gun. Besides his plan didn't include a showdown, where, even if he caught them, it

She was still worried and he knew she hadn't told him everything

would be his word and the word of an old prospector some folks considered half crazy, against the word of a man like Juan Naranjo—still a respected citizen, his plot to save his proud family from bankruptcy still generally unsuspected.

When he laid the cards on the table for Sheriff Carmody Stan was going to have evidence so plain no one could deny it.

Suddenly a girl's cry tore through the stillness. Not very loud, but utterly terrified, then it broke off in an odd little gurgle.

Stan sprang to his feet. Stumbling over rocks and rotten logs in the dark, swearing, he ran down the hill, old Dulce close at his heels. Halfway down he saw flame begin to flare up the inside of the cabin, and heard the hard pound of horse's hoofs going away—around the hill, instead of back down the trail.

He put on a new burst of speed while a prayer went up in his heart. He knew the voice he had heard was Louise Stinson's.

He stumbled against a log. Old Dulce passed him, running high like a jackrabbit. Stan scrambled up and ran on. Almost shoulder to shoulder they rounded the corner of the cabin and shoved the door open.

Louise was lying unconscious on the floor. Beyond her flames were shooting ceiling high. The fire evidently had been started in the back of the room, near the bedding they had left rolled up to resemble old Dulce's sleeping body.

Despite the soreness of his wounded arm, Stan picked the girl up and carried her down to the spring. Old Dulce wiped her face gently with a damp bandanna, but still she lay like a limp rag doll in the cowboy's arms.

"She'll be all right," old Dulce said reassuringly, "but that was a near thing. A couple more minutes an' we couldn't have saved her."

Stan shuddered, realizing now, if he hadn't fully realized it before, how infinitely dear this red-haired, sparkling-eyed girl was to him. He had made a bad mistake in believing she would be in no danger as long as Joe Naranjo loved her.

He didn't know what the New Mexico law was, but he supposed in a case where there were no heirs left to claim an estate, it would automatically revert to the state to be sold for taxes. In that case, if their plans had gone right, with Stan, Louise and Dulce out of the way, no one but the Naranjos would know there were valuable minerals—and they could buy the Bar S cheap.

OLD DULCE'S sharp ears had picked up another sound. "Listen!" he said softly. "There's somebody—a lot of somebodys comin'!" In the light from the burning cabin, Stan saw the old man's face tighten, and a hunted fear flame into his eyes. He took a deep breath. "You better get your horse an' get up on the hill out of sight, son, I've got a hunch this ain't goin' to be nice."

Stan's lips tightened. He shook his head. "I ain't that breed of dog, Dulce!"

They moved away from the spring, up closer to the burning house. Stan laid the girl on a strip of level, dry ground, where some of the warmth from the fire would reach her.

He felt naked and helpless without a gun. Suddenly old Dulce whirled and scrambled up the hill at his high, loping run. Stan knew he had gone after his worn old carbine that he had forgotten in their utter shock when they heard the girl scream. It made Stan feel a lot more confident to know the old man would be up above with a rifle.

He didn't have long to wait. Sheriff Carmody rode in the lead, and to Stan's surprise, crowding close behind him on a little brown pony, was Juan Naranjo. That was a shock. He had been sure that the person who had ridden here with Louise, knocked her out, and left her lying in the burning cabin had been Juan. But he had heard that person ride off at a gallop the other way. In this rough and broken country it would not be possible for the rider to have made a circle and joined the sheriff's posse this quick.

His eyes swept over the rest of them—ten who were strangers to him, and in the rear little Doctor Stevens and Slim Talley.

Juan's sharp eyes dropped from Stan to the slim body of the girl, and for a minute the suave mask of his dark face failed to hide shock and alarm. Then he had himself in hand. "It's Louise Stinson! For God's sake—what's she doing here? What's happened?"

The sheriff swung his portly body off his horse. "Where's Dulce Jenkins?" The way he said it was an accusation. "McConnico, you're under arrest—for a lot of things, includin' misrepresentin' the state of your health to get out of jail, wife desertion, prob'ly murder!"

"Dulce's on the hill," Stan said. "With a rifle trained on this crowd!"

"He's lying!" Juan Naranjo said sharply. "He killed the old man and left him to burn. He tried to kill the girl too. Let's string him up before he gets away again!"

"That's right!" one man agreed.

The doctor knelt beside the girl. He looked up at Juan. "Shut up, Juan!" he said sharply. "Louise is all right. She's coming to. She'll tell us what happened." His eyes shifted to Stan. "If what Juan claims is true—so help me—I won't lift a finger to keep them from stringing you up!"

For answer to that Stan raised his voice. "Hey, Dulce!" he yelled. "Tell the doc you're all right!"

Dulce's answered shout was plenty profane. "Of course I'm all right. An' I've got my gun pointin' straight at Juan Naranjo's black heart!"

The men were all off their horses now. What had been an angry murmur among them quieted. Slim Talley edged around to stand beside Stan. He had a gun at his hip, and his hand wasn't far from it.

JUAN NARANJO ran a tongue over dry lips. He was in a desperate hurry, but he didn't want any of these men to remember afterward that he had been the ringleader of the mob.

"We came after McConnico, sheriff," he said impatiently. "You've got him. What are you waitin' on?"

"I've arrested him," the Sheriff protested mildly. "I'm waitin' now to hear what Louise has to say." He ran his fingers through stubby grey hair. He wasn't used to worrying with complicated problems, but now his mind was plowing stolidly through. "McConnico could have left her to burn, if he'd wanted to. But she ain't hurt much, an' Jenkins ain't hurt. I'd kinda like to know what goes on here."

The girl moaned softly.

Stan took a deep breath. The doctor's and Slim Talley's presence gave him a better break with this mob than he had expected.

"We figgered it was about time for an 'accident' to happen to Dulce," he said. "Burnin' his cabin down some night with him in it was the natural way to do it. We left some bedding rolled up on his cot to look like he was in there asleep, then we went up on the hill to wait. We heard horses comin'—then pretty soon Louise screamed, and the cabin started to burn. The other rider got away before Dulce and I could get down. Louise was on the floor in the cabin—unconscious. We carried her out. Then you folks rode up. Somebody arranged it so that your timin' was mighty good."

He could sense that they didn't believe him. Slim Talley's quick indrawn breath told him that even the Bar S cowboy had his doubts.

The girl moaned again.

The doctor slipped an arm under her shoulders. "Who hit you, Louise?"

"I—I don't know." She groaned again. "It—it was dark. Somebody slipped up from behind."

"That's enough!" Juan Naranjo said with sudden violence. "What are we waiting on now, boys?"

Slim Talley's gun came out. "Hold it, Juan!"

Stan dropped to one knee beside the girl. "Who came up here with you, Louise?"

Her eyes flew open. She put out a hand and her cold fingers closed around the cowboy's as if groping for safety. He could see awareness coming back into her face.

"Why—it was Lita! She—"

"You're out of your head!" Juan broke in sharply. "Lita went straight home from the hotel!"

Louise suddenly sat up. Her eyes went around the group of men, then to the burning building. Her hand was still holding tight to Stan's. She shivered. "It *was* Lita!" she said positively.

"Can you tell us what happened, Louise?" Doctor Stevens prompted her gently.

Louise turned her head toward Stan as if he was the only one who was important to her. "Juan tried to make me believe you were lying about the potash, Stan. Lita said if I'd come up and talk to Dulce Jenkins, he would say so too. I let her persuade me to come. I knew you'd be here, Stan—and I thought if we all talked it over together, maybe we could settle everything and then they would leave us alone.

"There wasn't any light in the cabin. I knocked on the door and when you didn't answer, I pushed it open and started to call. Then Lita hit me from behind. I screamed—and—that's the last I remember."

For a moment there was dead silence. The fire had about burned down now. In its fading glow Stan thought Juan Naranjo's face had taken on a ghastly hue.

Juan cleared his throat. "You're either completely out of your head, Louise—or you're lying," he said calmly. "Lita went home from the hotel. My grandmother always waits up for her. She can tell you, Sheriff, when Lita got home. Let's ride over and ask her."

The attitude of the men who had come man-hunting for Stan McConnico changed some with the girl's telling. Most of them knew her and trusted her word, but probably most of them were also thinking how hard it would be to convict important people like the Naranjos of any such doings, if they hung together.

Stan stood up. "Let's do that, Sheriff," he said. "If Lita was here—there'll be a way of proving it."

LITA NARANJO looked as if she had been wakened from a sound sleep. She had a rich, red silk robe over her pajamas. Her dark hair was prettily tousled, and she came downstairs rubbing her eyes.

Joe had been reading in front of the fireplace when they arrived. Now his good-looking face was pale and strained.

Lita stopped abruptly when she saw Louise. Her dark eyes widened. She threw

one swift glance at Juan, then back to the other girl.

"Louise! What's happened?"

Sheriff Carmody believed in the direct approach. "Did you go up to the Jenkins cabin with Louise tonight, Lita?"

Lita shook her head. "No! I saw Louise in town, talked to her a little while, then came straight home. I've been in bed at least an hour and a half, haven't I, Joe?"

Joe Naranjo hesitated, while he tamped tobacco carefully in his pipe. Then he said: "That's right. What's happened, Sheriff?"

"You came to town horseback this evening, Lita?"

"Yes."

"What horse were you riding?"

She threw her head up with an impatient gesture. "Star Dust, my new palomino. Why?"

Joe Naranjo came over to stand at his sister's side. "Why these question, Carmody?"

It was Louise Stinson who answered him. "Lita tried to kill me tonight, Joe, and to burn Dulce Jenkins to death in his cabin. She and Juan thought Stan McConnico would be blamed for it. Juan had a mob already stirred up to hang him—tonight!"

"The girl lies, *kermano*!" said Juan Naranjo sharply, and Stan McConnico sensed that the way he used the Spanish word "brother" could be a warning to Joe to stay in line.

Joe looked at his sister. "Is it true, Lita?"

"No!"

Quietly Stan said, "Slim, will you and Dulce go get that palomino of Miss Naranjo's an' bring him around front?"

"What's the horse got to do with it?" Juan broke in violently.

"Plenty!" Stan could not resist letting his smile imitate Juan Naranjo's own usual suave politeness. "Sheriff, Dulce and I muddled half a bag of cement in that puddle on the trial below his cabin. If Lita's palomino went through there tonight, he'll be carryin' some souvenir smears!"

Lita Naranjo wasn't slow getting his point. Her dark eyes widened with terror. Proud arrogance melted out of the set of her chin. She whirled suddenly into a chair and started crying.

Joe Naranjo had turned a ghastly white. Slowly he laid down his pipe. "Juan!" His voice came out rough and unsteady. "I lied for you—I covered for you! God help me, I even helped you, because you are my brother! But you promised me not to harm Louise! I warned you what I would do!"

"*José!*" Lita's sharp use of Joe's Spanish name was like a warning dagger brandished in his face, but Joe Naranjo paid it no heed.

"Now I will go on the witness stand, Sheriff," he went on with a strange, tight-lipped calm. "I will tell every damned thing—how Juan killed Newt Stinson! How he shot McConnico! How he—"

Juan Naranjo's dark face had suddenly twisted into a mad mask of fury. His hand dropped to his hip and came up with a gun. Stan McConnico sprang at him, his long reach chopping the gun barrel down so that the bullet meant for Joe Naranjo ripped into the floor, as Stan seized him.

From her chair directly behind Joe, Lita sprang to her feet. "*Cobarde!*" The Spanish word was loaded with contempt. "You lousy coward—to double-cross your own brother!"

Nobody saw the litle derringer flash up from the pocket of her robe in time to stop it. The bullet caught Joe squarely in the middle of the back. The wind that went out of him was like a sigh as he staggered a single step toward Louise Stinson, then fell on his face.

As the sheriff leaped toward her, Lita whirled like a wildcat away from him. The next instant she had turned the derringer to her own breast and squeezed the trigger.

Shock and dazed unbelief struggled over Sheriff Carmody's ruddy face. "God!" he said slowly. "An' I always thought they was such nice people!"

Then he turned to snap handcuffs on Juan Naranjo.

Louise Stinson stood straight and still near the door as the sheriff hustled his prisoner out. She was crying silently, big tears streaking unheeded down her drawn, white cheeks.

Stan McConnico came and put his arms tight around her.

"We better go home, honey," he said gently.

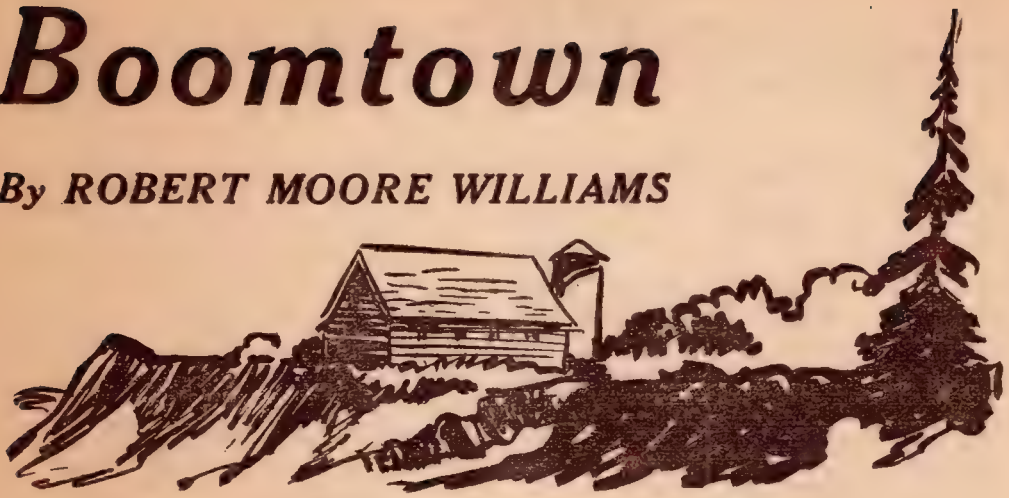
Louise nodded. She could not smile for him, so close in the wake of shock and horror, but inside a new warmth, a new feeling of security had begun stealing around her heart. She knew that from now on, home for her would be within the tight circle of Stan McConnico's arms, and she was glad to be there.

Meet Me in

She was already there, waiting for him

Boomtown

By ROBERT MOORE WILLIAMS



HER OLD APPEAL held across the years till the moment of fateful decision

BARR HAYDEN was at the back counter of Blount's Store, fondly lining up the sights of the new Henry rifle with a knothole in the wall, when through the front door there came, as silently as a moving shadow, his partner Ned Bruckner. Hayden waved at him.

"Come here, Ned. I've found me a Henry gun."

Ned moved to him, glanced at the gun, then at Barr Hayden, spoke tonelessly, "Better buy it, Barr. We're likely to need it."

Intended for Hayden's ears alone, the words were spoken softly. Ned Bruckner was a mountain man. He had tramped the prairies and the mountains of the Far West for more than thirty years, moving farther westward as the beaver were trapped out. He had learned to walk silently and speak softly. There were listening ears and watching eyes here in this store, and he had no intention of revealing any information to them. He nodded toward the door and turned and walked away as silently as he had come, confident that his partner would understand. Hayden followed him.

"The gun, sir," the storekeeper called. Hayden glanced down at the weapon he was still holding. "I'm just stepping outside," he explained. "I'll be back in a minute." Henry rifles were rare weapons in this country as yet, and he meant to buy this gun.

"That is very well," the storekeeper answered, "but leave the gun here, please, until you return."

"Hunh, think I'm trying to steal it?" Hayden answered. "You save this gun for me." He laid the Henry on the counter and followed his partner outside. "What's up, Ned?"

"Trouble. Word has got around that we brought gold dust in here to trade for supplies. There's a bunch of roughs who figure we've made a new gold strike somewhere. When we leave they're gonna follow us."

Hayden laughed. "They'll sure follow us a hell of a ways. We traded a white beaver skin to a Blackfoot Injun for that dust. I got an idea they'll be mighty tired of riding before they follow us back to *our* diggings!" He laughed again at the thought of a gang of would-be claim jumpers trailing a couple of trappers over half

of the Idaho territory trying to locate a non-existent gold strike. Then his laugh went into silence as he saw Ned was not responding.

"*We* know where we got the gold dust, but they don't," Ned said. He made a gesture with his hand, a gesture that took in all of the town of Wesco and its inhabitants. Seen from a distance, this town looked like an amazing collection of log cabins and of buildings made out of pure white marble. On closer approach, however, the pure white marble turned into cotton sheeting tacked over poles. Wesco was a boom town. Many of its inhabitants were as false as its buildings.

Ned Bruckner nodded down the street. From the next corner two men were watching them. Nondescript in appearance, the two men might have been anybody. Hayden knew neither of them. "One or the other has been follering me around all day," Ned Bruckner said. "I think we ought to get out of this place, except—" His voice dropped, and his face clouded. Hayden knew what he was thinking. He felt pressure rise in him and knew that his own face was turning hard.

When he'd come into this boomtown to trade for needed supplies, Hayden's life had been uncomplicated and untroubled. The past was forgotten, or nearly so, and the future nothing to worry about. But in this town of Wesco, Barr Hayden had come face to face with trouble—a woman.

Looking down the street now, he saw her suddenly come out of a store. She saw him, smiled and waved, then came resolutely toward him, an eagerness in her walk and manner. At just the sight of her he felt his heart jump, felt also the pressure of an emotional crisis begin to build up in him. Grunting, his face expressionless, Ned Bruckner moved away. Barr Hayden waited for Matilda Jefflin.

HE HAD not known, until he'd arrived here and met her face to face, that Matilda Jefflin was in this town. Now, after seven years, his heart still jumped at the sight of her and old memories came back to plague him. . . . Shawneetown, on the back of the Ohio, seemed far away. He had forgotten the laughing, willing girl he had known there when he was eighteen and she was sixteen. He had forgotten the plans they had made together in those days, to run away to the Far West and hunt Indians and buffaloes together. He had also forgotten why they hadn't carried out those plans, except that Tom Jefflin had been one reason—though not the biggest reason, he suspected. But he had come West alone and had met her again here in boomtown. His eyes devoured her as she hurried toward him.

"Barr!" She was breathless, her eyes sparkling at the sight of him.

He took off his hat. "Matilda, you're prettier than ever." Watching the smile of pleasure on her face, he guessed she didn't hear many compliments these days.

"How long are you going to be here, Barr?"

"We're not sure yet," he answered slowly. "Ned is itchin' to get away. Too civilized here to suit him. Maybe tomorrow, maybe today."

Behind her face was pressure. It showed through. When she spoke her words were little gusts of sound. "Barr, I want—I've got to see you before you leave."

"Of course, Matilda," he answered politely. "Any time you say." He wanted to see her again, he knew.

"Tonight!" She was standing very close to him, looking up, and he had the impression that if they had not been on the main street, her hands would have been on his shoulders.

"Uh," he said, "does Tom know about this?"

"Oh, bother Tom!" Her voice said she didn't want to hear about Tom Jefflin again, not ever. "He'll be at the saloon, gambling. Barr, I've got to see you." She hesitated, and he could see her thinking of some place where they could meet.

"Maybe you could tell me now," he suggested.

"No, there isn't time," she said. "Barr, this may sound awful, but do you know of a place called Windy Hill?" At his nod, she went on quickly, as if she was deter-

mined to get this said before her courage failed. "I'm going for a ride this afternoon. I'll meet you at Windy Hill at sundown." Her eyes begged him not to misunderstand what she meant. Her eyes said there was something she wanted to talk to him about, that nothing else was involved.

"All right, Matilda," he said slowly.

"Good. I have to hurry now." She turned and moved down the street. Watching her go, he was aware of her tallness, of her litheness, and of the fact that he had kissed her a lot of times a long, long while ago. Why had he left Shawneetown and Matilda? He tried to remember. Something he had not liked, or thought he had not liked, an angry moment, a sudden spurting word? He could not remember. Turning, he entered the store to complete his purchase of the Henry gun.

It held twelve cartridges in the magazine, and one in the chamber. A Sharps single shot buffalo gun was the rifle Hayden had carried up until now, a good gun, but there were times when a mountain man needed more than one shot. Tales of the Henry gun—the rifle you loaded on Sunday and shot all the rest of the week—had passed along the trails to the West. Every man wanted one. Hayden had seen only one of them until he had found this one here in the store. It had just arrived, and it wouldn't be here long.

Moving through the door, Hayden stopped, disbelief in his eyes. Standing at the back counter, holding the Henry gun, was Tom Jefflin. Hayden had not seen Jefflin enter. Presumably the man had come in through the side door.

Tall and slender, wearing a long coat, a flowing black tie, his shirt the purest of white linen, his hat a stylish stovepipe, in this booming town, Tom Jefflin was badly over-dressed, but no man seemed to find any reason to make fun of him. Perhaps it was the expression on his face, cold, hard, and implacable, that kept men from making jokes about his clothes . . . perhaps it was the butt of the navy revolver barely visible in the shoulder holster under his coat or the derringer he carried in his sleeve.

AS HE HAD known Matilda in Shawneetown, so had Hayden known Tom Jefflin there. The man had come into the town from up the river and had met Matilda. Soon after this, Hayden had gone West.

"Howdy, Tom," Hayden said.

Jefflin was smoking a long cigar. Hearing his name called, he glanced up from the gun he was examining. "Hello, Hayden." Lifting the rifle, he sighted it at the knothole in the wall. Behind the counter, watching with apprehension on his face, was Blount. Standing beside the storekeeper was a young woman whom Hayden vaguely remembered was the man's daughter. He moved to the back of the store. "How do you like my gun, Tom?" he said.

Jefflin took the rifle from his shoulder. His agate-brown eyes flicked over Hayden's face. "It's a fine rifle," he said. "That's why I bought it."

"That's why *you* bought it?" Hayden said. The store was very still. Behind the counter Blount was wiping sweat from his face. The young woman looked as if she were about to faint. Her eyes were fixed on Hayden, mutely warning him.

"Yes," Jefflin said. Amusement showed on his face, as if he were laughing at some secret joke known only to him.

Hayden glanced at the storekeeper. "There seems to be some mistake here, so let's get everything in order. When I went outside to talk to my partner, I told you to save this gun for me."

The sweat was clearly visible on Blount's face. "But you didn't *say* you were going to buy it. I didn't know you were. Ain't that right, Mary? Ain't that the way it was?" He appealed to his daughter for confirmation, but didn't get it.

"Pa, that ain't the way it was. This gentleman was going to buy the gun, and you knew it."

"Mary, be quiet!" Blount wiped sweat from his face. He spread his hands in an appealing gesture. "Gents, let's not have any hard feelings about this."

"There's no hard feelings on my part," Jefflin said. "I bought the rifle." Possessively he hooked the Henry under his left

arm. "I'll want a couple of boxes of cartridges too."

"Yes, sir." Blount hastily placed the yellow boxes on the counter.

Jefflin glanced at the storekeeper. "Charge it," he said.

"Ch-charge it?" Blount faltered.

"Of course," Jefflin answered. "Some day I'll pay you, when I have a lucky run at the cards." Picking up the boxes of cartridges, he nodded to Jefflin and walked out the side door.

Hayden felt a hard core of anger form in him. "You let him walk off with merchandise without paying for it?" he said.

"How can I stop it?" Blount answered. "If I told him he couldn't have the gun, he'd come back later with a bunch of roughs and wreck the store. He's a bad man to buck."

"And that wife of his is worse than he is!" the girl spoke. She came around the counter. "I'm sorry, mister. It was your gun fair and square." Blue eyes smiled at him from a face that had a trace of freckles on it. "Don't hold it against us. We're doing the best we can."

Under other circumstances he might have noticed that Mary Blount was a very pretty girl. He was too angry now to notice such things. "It's all right," he said, and walked out of the store.

Shadows were beginning to stretch across the town of Wesco. The two men were still loafing on the corner. Ned Bruckner was waiting at the door of the store. "Did you get your gun, Barr?" Ned asked.

Hayden shook his head. Bluntly he told Ned what had happened. Bruckner showed no surprise. "I don't blame the storekeeper. Jefflin is bad medicine." He hesitated, his eyes searching Hayden's face. "What—" he fumbled—"what did the woman want?"

Hayden told him. Bruckner was silent. His eyes looked far away across the towns to the distant mountains.

"We had better hit the trail, Barr."

"Tomorrow," Hayden said, evasively.

"Then you *are* going to see her?"

"Yes."

"In spite of Tom Jefflin?"

"To hell with Tom Jefflin. I'm not trying to steal his wife. I'm trying to help a woman who is in trouble, a woman I once knew." Angrily, he turned away.

SO FAR as he could tell, he was not followed when he rode out of town. He rode a roundabout route, watching his back trail. The shadows were long when he reached Windy Hill. She was already there, waiting for him. He slid from his horse. "Barr, it's good to see you again!" She came toward him, then somehow she was kissing him.

He was astonished, more astonished than he would have been if he had kissed her.

"When you leave, take me with you." Her words rang in his ears. "I can't stand this place another day, I can't stand it another hour."

"Take you with me?" He heard his voice whisper the words. "Do you know where I'm going when I leave here?" He meant he was going to the mountains and to the hardships of a trapper's life. He knew that a trapper's cabin was no place for a woman.

"Yes. I mean—no. It doesn't matter. Anywhere. Just so it's with you. Oh, Barr, will you do it?"

"Lord knows I want to, Matilda!" he choked out the words. Did she know what she was doing to him? Did she know how she was twisting him around inside, how she was tying him in knots?

"Then you will do it?" He could feel the eagerness in her, he could hear it in her voice. Yet somehow or other she seemed able to forget she was another man's wife. He couldn't.

"Matilda. . . ."

She sensed what he meant to say and did not let him say it. "Why not?" She didn't wait for him to answer. "Are you scared of Tom? He'll never find us. I don't think he'll care enough to try to find me!"

"I'm not afraid of Tom."

"Then what is it?" Her voice was sharp with rising dissonance. "After all, I've practically thrown myself at you." Her

tone said he owed her something for that. "Do you have a wife somewhere? What difference does she make? I've got a husband." Her voice went on, riding over his protests before he had a chance to utter them, dominating him, trying to make him do as she wanted.

Inside his mind, something clicked. He remembered what he had been trying to recall, the real reason he had left Shawneetown. Even then he had had the feeling that bossing him was more important to her than loving him. It had been the thing that had sent him along the road to the mountains. It was still true.

"Oh, Barr!" Suddenly she was all melting woman in his arms. "Don't quarrel with me. Just take me with you."

"No, Matilda," he said. And meant it.

Like a cat, she spat, pulled away from him, sprang to her horse and swung into the saddle. "If you change your mind, let me know." Spurs jabbed into her horse.

Long after she was out of sight, the pound of beating hoofs came back. Fighting the sickness in him, he stood staring after her. If she had come back at this moment, he might have taken her with him.

He moved to his horse, mounted, rode slowly through the quiet dusk into Wesco. From the hurdy-gurdys in the saloons along Main Street came a continuous din, glaring, raucous music, shouts, and laughter. Somewhere a gun boomed. At the sound, the music seemed to falter for a moment and the laughter to die away. Then both picked up again. In this town what did one bullet matter? He dismounted in front of the one-story hotel where he and Ned were staying, went in, expecting to find Ned snoring on his coat in the long, barracks-like room at the rear which had been the only quarters they had been able to find. Through long habit, Ned Bruckner went to bed with the birds and got up with them.

BRUCKNER wasn't asleep on the cot. The blankets were tousled. This was all. Hayden went quickly to the front where the owner of the hotel looked out of a cubbyhole that he used as a desk. "Yeah, Hayden, about ten minutes ago a couple of fellers came in looking for him. Ain't they back there with him now?"

"No." Inside of Hayden, unease quickened into apprehension. "Which way did they go when they left?"

"They didn't come out this way. If they're not in the hotel, they must have went out the back way."

"I see. Did you know either of the men who came to see him?"

The hotel owner was suddenly evasive. "Never saw neither of them before. Since they was lookin' for him, I thought they was friends. Why? Anything wrong?"

"Thanks," Hayden answered. He moved through the door and down the street, looking for Ned.

Thirty minutes later he was still looking. He knew now that something was wrong. Turning a corner, he almost bumped into a hurrying woman. "Excuse me," he said, and moved on.

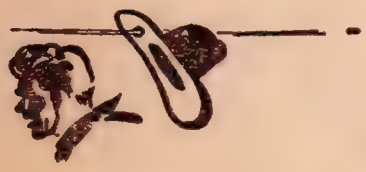
"Mr. Hayden!" She sounded all out of breath and frightened. Light from torches burning in front of a saloon cast a wan glow over her. He had to look twice to see the freckles.

"Miss Mary! What are you doing here at night?" At night, the streets of this town were no place for a girl alone.

All Full of Holes

By LIMERICK LUKE

Two outlaws 'way down on the Pecos
Got badly shot up in a fracas.
To the sheriff they said:
"We're so darned full of lead,
If you need any bullets, just shake us!"



Her hand came out of the folds in her dress. "I don't guess any man would bother me much." He saw the gun she held, a Navy revolver.

"I see," he said. Determination showed on her face. He grinned. This kind of courage he liked. "You'll do," he said and started on.

She caught his arm. "I've been looking for you."

"For me? With a gun? Don't shoot, miss!" He raised his hands in mock alarm.

"Don't joke!" Her voice was sharp with a sudden snap in it. "They've got your partner. I saw them walk him through the alley behind our store. He was between two men. They had their hands in their pockets, and I know they were pointing guns at him."

"How do you know this?" His voice was sharp.

"I followed them," the young woman answered. "Then to a cabin over the hill. I came to hunt for you."

"Miss Mary, you followed them!" It was a brave thing she had done.

"I don't know what they want with him."

"I do!" he said. There could be only one reason for kidnapping Ned Bruckner. "Miss Mary, will you show me this cabin?"

Her voice said she would show him anything he wanted to see at any time he asked her. She led the way.

SQUATTING on the side of a hill among a growth of pines, the cabin was built of logs. There was a moon overhead, but the light from it penetrated the pines only in patches. Shutters covered the single window of the cabin. Between the shutters a single glimmer of light was visible. From inside came a sound, the scream of a man.

"What's that?" Mary Blount whispered.

The sound lifted the hair along the back of Hayden's neck. "I've got a hunch I know what it is," he said. "You go back!" From the holster at his hip, he pulled his Navy gun.

There was a crack in the door of the cabin. Hayden applied his eye to the crack. Inside he caught a glimpse of a lantern swinging by a wire from the ceiling. He could see three men. One was Ned Bruckner. He was tied to a chair, and his hands were lashed palms down across the top of a heavy table.

"Talk up, dang you!" Hayden heard a voice growl. "I'll break the thumb next."

"But, gentlemen, I tell you I know nothing about any gold. We got this dust from a Blackfoot."

"To hell with that story! We heard that one before. Talk up or else!"

Hayden didn't stop to think how the door might be fastened. Backing up, he hit it with his shoulder, and with all his strength and weight. The heavy door was smashed open.

"Hands up or I'll kill you!" Hayden meant every word he said.

They didn't move.

Leaning carelessly against the bunk, unseen until this moment, Tom Jefflin did move. From inside the long coat he snatched the heavy gun he carried there. As he plunged into the room, Hayden caught a glimpse of the movement out of the corner of his eyes.

Before Hayden had stopped coming, Jefflin had snatched the gun free. He fired a single shot. And missed! Before he could fire a second shot, the gun in Hayden's hand had exploded.

Thunder shook the cabin. Hayden knew his first bullet struck Jefflin in or very near the heart. He fired again, pulling the trigger with grim determination, knowing that two shots either did the job or that it would never be done. He had two other men to reckon with!

One, the farthest from the door, was already snatching a gun from the holster at his hip. Hayden blasted at him, not knowing whether he hit or not. He swung the gun to cover the third man.

The fellow was already running, diving headfirst toward the door. Hayden snapped a shot at him as he went out, swung his gun back to cover the first man.

From the first man's fingers the gun was falling. He was trying to hold it, trying to catch it, trying to bring it up. The task

was beyond his strength. The gun fell. He fell with it. On the floor across the room Tom Jefflin was breathing heavily.

Outside in the night a gun whooped up. There was a crash of breaking underbrush, a shout, the thud of running feet. The gun thundered again. The sound of lead spatting into a tree came back. Again the gun hooted.

Listening, Hayden didn't have any trouble guessing the identity of the shooter out there. He was busy cutting Ned Bruckner loose when her face appeared in the doorway. "I thought I told you to go back," he said to her.

"I know you did," Mary Blount whispered. "But I thought you might need help."

On the floor, Jefflin's labored breathing was turning into broken words. Hayden listened. "Take care of Ned," he said to Mary Blount. "I want to talk to Tom before. . . . Take Ned outside."

The girl obeyed him. Ned Bruckner went willingly. Hayden knelt beside Jefflin.

"It looks like you get her," Jefflin whispered. "Well, you're welcome to her." Something like a laugh sounded in his throat.

"I don't know what you mean," Hayden said.

Dying, Jefflin explained what he meant.

MATILDA JEFFLIN was in a poker game at the back of the saloon. As soon as she saw Hayden she scooped up her cards and tossed her chips to the dealer. "Credit me with these." She came toward Hayden.

"Barr! You did change your mind! You're going to take me with you after all!" Her voice was an eager whisper in the crowded saloon. She knew nothing of what had happened at the cabin.

"You're willing to go even if there's no gold where I'm going?"

"But there is! Tom saw the dust!" She spoke much too quickly. As she realized what she had said, her eyes leaped up to his. "I don't know anything about gold," she said. "Who said anything about it?"

"Tom did," he answered.

"Tom!"

"He said you had planned the whole thing, planned to suck me into taking you back with me to the strike Ned and me had made. This was the way you would learn where it was."

"Tom said this?" Her face was suddenly white.

He nodded. "Only there's not any gold. There never was any. We got the dust from a Blackfoot, and where he got it only he knows. My guess is from a prospector he murdered. So you were trying to take the wrong man all the time, Matilda. You should have been working on the Blackfoot instead of me."

"I don't know you're talking about!" she whispered.

"Maybe you don't, maybe you do. Tom even told me why he wanted the Henry gun, so I wouldn't have it after you had gone with me and located the strike. He didn't want me to have that kind of weapon when he brought his bunch of claim jumpers along after us."

"Tom told you this?" she gasped.

"Yes," he answered, "before he died. Dying men usually tell the truth, Matilda."

In the lighted saloon, her face was a ghastly thing.

"If I was you, I would be out of town by noon tomorrow," he said. "I wouldn't want to take a chance on Ned Bruckner learning that you were the one who turned Tom and those two finger-breakers loose on him. When you failed with me, you turned to Ned, Matilda. Ned wouldn't like it." Turning, he walked away.

At noon the next day Barr Hayden and Ned Bruckner watched the stage pull out piled high with boxes and trunks that a woman might use to carry fashionable belongings. And the stage had as one of its passengers a heavily veiled woman.

With no feeling except tremendous relief, Hayden watched the six horses pull the heavy Concord away. Beside him, Ned Bruckner spoke. "You know, Barr, I've been thinking, that Blackfoot must have got that dust *somewhere*. Now when my hands get well I kind of thought that maybe you and me. . . ."

"It suits me," Hayden answered. He was looking along the street. The stage was passing Blount's store.

"It's settled then." Ned Bruckner sounded pleased. "I've always wanted to try my hand at hunting gold."

"One thing, though," Hayden said.

"What's that?"

"I'd kind of like to come back here in a month or two," Hayden said.

Bruckner followed the direction of Hayden's gaze. Mary Blount had come out of the hardware store. Hayden was watching her.

"Okay, Barr," Ned Bruckner said. "This is a different kind of a woman. From now on we'll make this town our headquarters." Somehow in this moment even Ned Bruckner sounded pleased. Hayden grinned.

KNOW YOUR WEST

1. Westport Landing and Independence were loading terminals for freight wagons on what famous old-time Western trail?

2. The wagon boss said he'd be dadblamed if he wanted a cowhand around who was always gimleting his horse. What did he mean?

3. Of course you wouldn't know the names of all Western counties, but you should be able to identify the state in which the following counties are found because of the association of their names with Western history: Austin, Atascosa, Bowie, Brazos, Deaf Smith, Houston, Milam, Trinity, San Jacinto.

4. The Cabrillo National Monument on Point Loma commemorates the landing place of the Spanish explorer Cabrillo in 1542—in what state?

5. Name two gambling games common in the saloons and honkytonks of the Old West.

6. Which has more toes, the front or hind foot of a jackrabbit, or have they the same number?

7. It's an old Western wisecrack that Sally Ann Crockett could tell a bear from a panther by the feel of its bite. Who was Sally Ann's husband?

8. Maybe "gut" ain't a nice word, but cowboys use it in a good many slang expressions. Blush and give one.

9. In what state are the Arches, Capitol Reef, Cedar Brakes, Dinosaur, and Timpanogos Cave National Monuments?

10. In common slang "gypped" means "cheated." Among old-time cowhands it had another, different meaning. What?

——*Rattlesnake Robert*

You will find the answers to these questions on page 76. Score yourself 2 points for each question you answer correctly. 20 is a perfect score. If your total is anywhere from 16 to 20, you're well acquainted with the customs and history of the cow-country. If your total score is anywhere from 8 to 14, you will have things to learn. If you're below 8, better get busy polishing up your knowledge of the West.

Salt on the Broomtails

By Roberta Childers

Mustangers take a great deal of pride in their roping

A MUSTANGER is a cowboy who has found an excuse for not shaving. And many a cowboy's little bride has discovered that when he swore wild horses couldn't drag him from her side, he didn't mean mustangs. Mustanging is a pernicious disease that breaks out sporadically much like malaria, coming on in the spring and continuing with little relief until late fall.

A mustang camp is a collection of bedrolls, cardboard boxes of grub, five-gallon cans of water (used sparingly), coffee grounds and ashes (dumped indiscriminately), flopping ceilings of tarp strung on ropes, and one-dish stews. Mustang stew is variously made of bacon, jackrabbits, potatoes, onions, beans, tomatoes, macaroni, rice, etc., in strange combinations. Mustang dishes are tin pie plates, one spoon and one tin cup per mustanger (the latter perpetually full of coffee), one fry pan, one coffee pot (large), and a kettle for stew.

The proper way to make a mustanger's bedroll is to lay down an old canvas and on top of that two or three weatherbeaten quilts and blankets and a small pillow. Add a couple of magazines, Westerns preferred, one clean shirt, two pairs of socks, a shooting iron well cleaned, a wallet containing the gal's picture, and a bottle of horse liniment. Tie together well.

When returned four months later, the bedroll will contain three quilts, more weatherbeaten and very dusty, some ticks, one dirty shirt, one half of one pair of socks, stiff, same wallet, same shooting iron well cleaned—all strongly flavored with liniment.

In order to run wild horses on the Nevada range, it is first necessary to apply to the Board of County Commissioners for permission in that area. If this is granted, a bond—$1,000 or more—must be put up

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More mustangs have been tamed than mustangers

to guarantee that any branded horses killed or injured in the run will be compensated for to the owner. Often found in the bunch are old horses whose brands have long since expired, and these are unclaimed. Brands must be re-recorded every five years. If they are not, they become common property and can be taken up by a new owner upon application to the State Board of Stock Commissioners.

An old wagon wheel slows him down

Once a mustanger has his permit and his bond for a territory, it is his exclusive right to work that territory. By the time he has pretty well cased the territory so he knows roughly how many horses are in it. He knows some of the watering places and about where the broncs will be at what time of the year, as they migrate with the season. He begins to lay his plans and decides whether he will water-trap the nags, fly them out and rope them, run them into corrals, or even whether foot-trapping will pay.

Either way he's not going to do it for free, unless he's very fortunate. Take the case of two cowboys I know who have an exclusive water hole on a dry range. They have built a fence around the place, a cheap one at that. When life gets boresome they take a case of beer (their story) and lie on the hill and wait for the horses to come in. Then they merely pull the gate shut, bring up a truck and load the catch. It's mustanging de luxe. Sometimes it's a dud. They tell only about the times they catch something.

However, a good stout fence will have to be built around a water hole, and a good hideaway for the gate closer has to be arranged in a gully or even in a dug hole.

Mustangs are wary and will go without water when they are suspicious—much to the surprise of one inexperienced mustanger who had four horses in the corral around a spring and three outside the fence. He let the four go back out, thinking the whole batch would then come in. Instead they all took off, and he learned a horse inside a fence is worth two in the brush. Next time he closed the gate quick.

WATER-TRAPPING horses is a game of waiting and patience. It pays off very well if there are plenty of horses and few holes to drink from.

Last spring in one section of the Toiyabe Range the boys thought they had the water holes all fixed, and yet the horses didn't come in. Riding the higher range one day, two cowpokes noticed a group of horses across the hill in the timber behaving strangely. One horse would disappear and suddenly reappear, and then another. They rode over to investigate and were amazed to find a narrow cave going into the hill. It was hardly wide enough for the horses to enter, and it ran in 40 feet or so. At the last it was ceiled so low the horses had to stoop to get the water at its end. The horses could not turn around and had to enter and back out one at a time, which they were doing in preference to risking the water traps laid for them.

Airplane running, in which the horses are scared into running into a corral, is faster but costs more. All pilots are not good mustangers, and many a cowboy who volunteered to ride with the pilot and handle the shooting iron found out a plane can be rougher than the toughest bronc he ever forked.

This is substantially the story several amateurs have told me:

"There I was, shooting out of that crackerbox plane on an angle looking down at the ground. Whenever I glanced up through the windshield, it was out of line and my stomach did a flipflop. The old blunderbus I had was a double-barreled number, and no matter which way I held it it walloped wickedly when I squeezed the trigger.

"We'd zoom down on a band of horses, and they'd run a little, but they weren't wild enough so the airplane would scare them. Then I'd let go with a shot, and it would burn the last of the band, and they'd take off—spreading around the ones in front. But the noise didn't scare the front ones, and they kept on at their regular stride. We couldn't scare the horses out from the trees in the mountains, but on the flats they went pretty good, though we couldn't turn them. We thought we could run in a few tamer ones that were used to the corral, but the mustangs were too smart and they slid past. The tamer horses went too, and we lost the whole works."

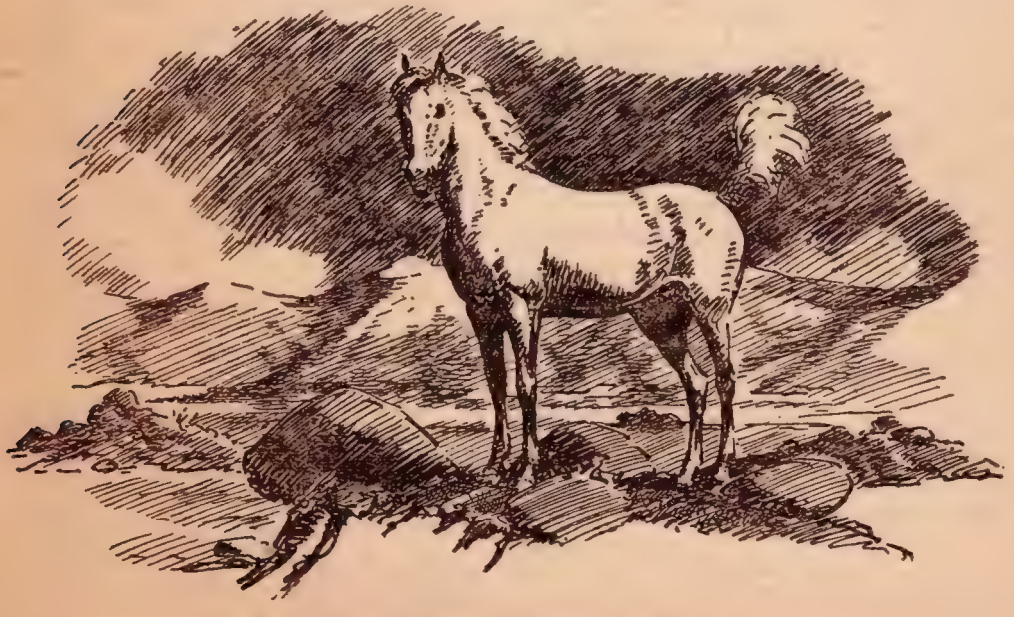
The men who have trained in the business do better. They often tie tin cans to the tail of the plane. Some even tie a piece of dynamite to a wire and cap and have a dynamo in the plane. It's loud enough to scare the whole band, and they really get going. A smart pilot can turn the horses or slow them down.

ALL THE corrals are ready before the run. Some have long brush fence wings that will turn the horses toward the corral. Of late, the heavy netting used by the army and navy has served good purpose. Even cloth strung on wire will often do. The true corrals, however, must be stout board. The horses will rip themselves to ribbons on wire. And a frightened horse can break his neck hitting wire. Once they are in, a canvas gate drops down. The horses won't hit this.

One very successful mustanger plants an old mare out in the hills before the run. She leads the horses into the corral with the plane nipping at their heels. They even follow the mare through a gate into the loading pen. Then the mare comes out while a man stands close. Wild horses won't come out while a man is around.

A loading chute is a great saving of time. Without it, horses will have to be roped and almost dragged into the trucks, and the bunch may be panicked.

If there is no place to build a corral—that is, if the terrain is flat open space—there is nothing to do but rope the horses the plane nudges out of the hills. On the dry lakes, where the surface is flat and hard and smooth as cement, even cars are used to run horses. It has to be done carefully, for a horse that has been run too hard and too long will be loco, not worth a whoop.



The most beautiful horse I ever saw

The saddle horses soon learn the chase is coming, when the airplane begins to hum, and go wildly eager. A mustanger fondly believes his saddle horse is loyal, looking out for his master's interest, but more likely the nag says bitterly, to his free brethren, "I gotta work, so why not you?"

Mustangers take a great deal of pride in their roping, especially off the back of a swaying pickup truck that tries to twist and turn with the horse. Generally when a mustanger is roping off the pickup, one end of the rope is attached to a heavy object, such as an old wagon wheel, which is dragged off by the horse and slows him down.

Most mustangs caught on the range are a pretty scrubby lot. In their natural setting they have a glamorous appeal that evaporates when they're crammed into a truck to go to the chicken feed markets. Probably one out of 30 will have conformation enough to escape that last ride.

The most beautiful horse I ever saw was a golden palomino stallion standing free on a little brown rocky knoll. A deep blue sky gave him a perfect background. The knoll, one of many, was set in a dry lake that shimmered glassily, each little knoll an illusive boat that sailed a weird sea.

He was bait for mustangers, of course. After he was roped and haltered, they tied him to one of the heavy wagon wheels that were scattered at strategic sites on the lake. He gentled down quickly. He was kept out of the chicken feed load and eventually partially broken, but went locoed and would run over anybody or anything. (Wild horses get brain fever in civilization unless they are given shots for immunity.)

The day he was loaded out to make the slaughter house after his heartbreaking year in civilization, I had the feeling that another frontier had fallen. Along with the wild Indian and the buffalo, the wild horses will go too.

But mustanging is not so profitable since the government canceled its slaughterhouse contracts and shipments of horse meat to Europe. The price dropped from four cents to two, and that can spell the difference between profit and loss for the mustanger. Some, though, are paid by the ranchers and the Federal Government to clear the range for cattle. It is a necessary evil.

THE HARDEST horses to handle, those that take the most out of a tired mustanger, are the ones that have been on a marijuana binge and suffer from a hangover. They eat loco weed and get to the point where they seek it out, even though they were driven to it first by dry range and no grass.

They seem to lose all sense of balance and prefer to lie on their backs in a loading chute with their feet up in the air. They stand around listlessly and often topple over dead unexpectedly.

Probably the strangest mustang ever caught, the Camel Horse, was roped this summer in the Toiyabe Range. The horse had been observed several times by riders, but no one had got close enough to believe what he thought he saw. And those who didn't see him were inclined to listen with a scoffing ear to the tales about him. The hump-backed horse was called The Night Horse and was considered a product of the long dry spell the buckaroos had scratched with the ragged edge of a bottle.

The Night Horse was a lonely horse. He was shunned by all the other mustangs and bore long scars of their distaste. Whenever he tried to join a group, they took off in a snub.

When the buckaroos finally roped this horse, he was easily gentled and soon acted as though he was glad to be finally accepted socially somewhere, even if only in a mustang camp. How he could have survived in poor terrain over a period of years, with a neck so short he could not eat off the ground, is one of nature's miracles. He even had his public, playing to an audience of paying customers at the State Fair.

Which only goes to show that a mustanger works 14 hours a day, as a short shift, moves camp every couple of weeks in his spare time, is seldom bothered with company for dinner, and has a fascinating life that is full of surprises, the biggest of these being that he makes enough money to equip himself to go mustanging again.

Heading for the Mountains

By Stephen Payne

JIM SCOPE was cooking supper at the ZU outfit's lonely range camp when Tex Markham arrived from the home ranch, and said, "They're wantin' you to show up tomorrow—sure. I'm to take over."

Sudden anticipation of pleasure flashed for a moment in Jim's eyes; then his dark, weatherbeaten face tightened. Old hand Tex, who had been a mighty help in building up the ZU until its owner had now become the richest man in the Turock locale, was carefully hiding what might be his real thoughts. But his faded blue eyes were upon the younger cowboy, as if Tex was measuring Jim by some standard, and giving deep consideration to his real worth.

THE ZU ranch was all his, if he'd take the girl who went with it

"That's all you were to tell me?" Jim asked slowly.

"Uh-huh." Tex looked away up the narrow valley and on to the rolling, tree-

less hills, the hills of this fair-to-middling cow range where grass was plentiful and water was scarce. "Reckon you can guess the rest," he added, and turned his horse toward the small corral and little shed of a barn.

Jim went back to his cooking and mechanically opened a can of beans to eke out grub enough for two instead of one. So he could guess the rest! Tex didn't like the situation, but where a less friendly, less experienced, less interested waddy would have hoorawed Jim, Tex didn't want to talk about Jim Scope's love affair with the ranch owner's daughter, Miss Ella Sherman.

From that day, now one year ago, when a horse too high-lifed for her had stampeded with Ella, and Jim had saved her life, he had been Ella's favorite.

An excitingly pleasant position for a fellow like Jim to be in, and yet a mighty embarrassing one. All the town folks and the dry-land homesteaders, all the ranchers and cowboys, as well as all of the ZU hands knew about it. They also knew that Jim was merely a forty-a-month hand while Ella Sherman was going to inherit—and reasonably soon, too—a half-million-dollar cow outfit. What a sweet prospect, what a setup for the lucky man, Jim Scope.

To get away from merciless tongues and to give both Ella and himself a chance to make up their minds definitely, Jim Scope had asked the big boss, Moffat Sherman, for this range-riding job. Now, too soon, he had been called back again to the home ranch.

Tex Markham came in and hung his hat on a nail and washed for supper while Jim put the meal on the table, his thoughts forty miles away at the ZU ranch. When last he had seen lovely Ella, she had told him she'd be taking a trip in mid-summer. "And it'll be wonderful, Jim, if we can reach a definite understanding before I go. I'd like to have things settled."

Jim Scope knew that Ella's father had an idea the girl should marry a well educated man with a background of culture and an established position in the world. But although he could boss his own outfit, he could not manage his daughter.

TEX MARKHAM had his cob pipe going before he asked a few pertinent questions about the job he was to take over. Jim answered them, and that was all they said.

After breakfast the following morning, Jim tied a few personal articles in his slicker behind his saddle, and then, unable to bear Tex's silence any longer, he whirled suddenly on the old hand.

"I know you don't like this. But just what are you thinking, dog-gone your old hide?"

Tex surprised the young man. "Jim, maybe like they say, love can conquer all. If it does, okay. I s'pect you're nuts 'bout her, and if she likes you strong enough, why the two of you, pullin' together, can take it."

"Take what, Tex?"

"You darned well know. Take what folks is goin' to say and keep on sayin', and live it down. On t'other hand—" Tex gripped Jim's shoulder firmly—"the chances are strong as how this deal just won't do. I needn't tell you why, 'cause you've got plenty of plain old hoss sense. So long now."

Jim rode away across the sun-browned hills of a semi-arid land. Far off to his left, hulking mountains propped up the blue horizon. Those distant mountains seemed to call and beckon to Jim Scope. Beyond the frontal range and on beyond the higher, towering further range, he had once found a beautiful green valley which was still unsettled virgin land. He had thought then that some day when he got a stake made he'd go back to that dream valley and there pitch his camp.

That was a dream, just as his making a stake was so far only a dream. Jim Scope was sending almost every cent he earned back home to his folks. Except for current wages he had coming, he was broke.

He was broke, yet if he wished he could marry a girl worth half a million dollars! Marry her, you damn fool, and set up your mother and dad and little brothers and sister so they'll never again want for anything. In spite of what Tex said, it will work out all right—if I hit the collar, if I

take the load off old Sherman's shoulders, run the outfit better than he runs it, and work, work for an interest in the big spread!

With twenty-six miles behind him and fourteen still to ride, Jim Scope put in at a drylander homestead. He'd have passed it up except he had once met the girl and her brother who were trying to make a living in this sandy barren area. It was an area where wells must be driven deep to find water and windmills were depended on to pump it up into tanks for domestic use and for watering stock.

Jim Scope had observed four abandoned windmills and tumbledown shacks with sand piled high around them before he reached the miserable ranch belonging to Dale Swinton and his sister Kit. A couple of months back, Jim had talked with Dale and the serious young farmer had at that time hoped he might make a crop this season.

This crop, Jim noted, on land plowed and planted, consisted now only of thrifty weeds on a field of shifting brown earth, eddied and furrowed into grotesque patterns by the hot dry wind. Yet that wind turned the creaking windmill whose pump brought a trickle of rank alkali water up into a tank. Jim Scope's horse turned up its nose at this water, but a gaunt milk cow and the drylander's team had become used to the terrible stuff and were drinking thirstily.

WHITE curtains at the one window of the shack, and some bright flowers bordering either side of the door, carefully watered and cared for, told Jim that Kit was still here. And, oddly enough, he was strangely eager to see her.

"Hello the house?" His voice was cheerful.

The door came open. "Hello, yourself. Oh, Jim! I'm so glad to see you again."

Jim Scope reached for his hat and an awkward little silence ran along. The girl was a blonde, with corn-colored hair and bright blue eyes, yet she was tanned as brown as a coffee berry from outdoor work. Her rough work clothing of faded overalls and patched shirt revealed rather than concealed her slender, girlish figure. When she smiled, Jim Scope suddenly discovered that Kit Swinton was darned nice to look at.

"Dale's gone," she said, "but you'll stop for dinner anyhow, won't you?"

"I was hoping you'd ask me to stop, Miss Swinton!" Jim Scope swung off. "Dale's gone? The way you said that sounded sort of funny."

The girl lifted her head as if defying something disagreeable. "He's pulled out—for good. He's given up and gone away."

Jim thought Dale had showed good sense in getting out. Then, not seeing anything at all for his horse to eat, he tied the bridle reins to the hind wheel of the Swinton's wagon.

"For good?" he repeated at last. "But you didn't go with him?"

Kit sighed and then said defiantly, "I wouldn't give up. I begged Dale to stay because maybe next year we might get a crop. . . . Although this isn't much, it is home after all. . . . Dale wouldn't take anything with him. He left me the wagon and team and the cow and all the food we had. . . . Come in, Jim."

Jim stepped into the cabin. Except for a dresser and a large mirror and a curtained off corner to serve as a clothes closet its furnishings were as limited as those of the average range camp. Yet, Jim realized with genuine amazement, the interior of this tar paper shack was as clean and neat and homelike as if it were a town cottage.

"You sure make this like a home," he declared. "But you can't stick it out here. There's not a darned thing to bring an income."

"I can stick it out."

She went over to feed the fire in the stove, with bits of brush and a pile of dried cow chips. "Of course," she turned to look at him as if defying contradiction, "I'll have to get a job in town for the winter, cooking or hashing or something like that, but I'll make a grubstake and I'll—"

"Lose that grubstake trying to raise another crop of beets, spuds, grain, or whatever dry-landers plant. . . . Your brother was right. It's no good, Kit!" Jim was

astonished by his own vehemence, for after all this wasn't his business.

"Oh, you!" she said bitingly. "Like any other cowboy, you're sure this country is only fit for grazing. You would be—working for Moffat Sherman. They say he owns all of the best land that can be irrigated from the big river. Well, it was smart of him to get it. I've heard he has wonderful grazing land in the hills away south of here too."

"He has, Kit. Not the best I've seen by any means, but plenty good. The best cow country I've ever seen for a little outfit is—"

Jim drew a word picture of his green valley in the distant Rockies, and Kit's eyes were dreamy.

"It must be a lovely spot, Jim. Why didn't you stay there?"

"I couldn't," he stammered, suddenly confused. "There were reasons." Kit had troubles of her own. He'd not bother her with any of his.

She was now fixing the dinner, her profile toward him and he saw her smile wisely. "Reasons? Oh, you'd met Ella Sherman before you saw that valley?"

So she knew about him and Ella!

For a moment Kit was entirely still, her gaze through the one window, on the distant mountains, a wistful, unvoiced thought in her face for Jim Scope to read if he were able. Then she said lightly, "Of course you'd not want to be a two-bit rancher when—"

"Kit, I still think I want to be one!"

"Pooh! Don't tell me that sort of fairy tale! Dinner's ready. Let's eat."

From her garden, Kit had radishes, lettuce and onions which she watered by hand. She had stewed turnips and carrots as well. She said regretfully that neither the corn nor squash had matured. Potatoes weren't yet large enough to eat, but she would have vegetables for the fall and winter. Although feed was very short, the cow was still giving milk, so she had real cream for the coffee, and a pat of butter for her home-made bread. After three weeks of pancakes and soda biscuits, that bread made a hit with Jim Scope.

He said so and added, teasing. "What? No jackrabbit?"

Kit grimaced. "I can't go jackrabbits any more. Dale wanted meat twice a day, and now the smell of boiling or frying rabbit sickens me. . . . I do have a cake, Jim."

BIDDING Kit good-by two short pleasant hours later, Jim abruptly remembered that Ella didn't like to be kept waiting. But he had enjoyed this interlude, except for the conviction it wasn't right for Kit to try to make a go of that forlorn sand patch. She had said bravely that one good crop of wheat would put her over the hump. Yes, but a person could starve four or five years waiting for that one good year. Oh, well, a fine girl like her was sure to meet a jim-dandy fellow so there was no call for Jim to worry about her. None at all.

The topography of the country changed. A line of tall green cottonwoods marked the course of the river, and the road threaded tumbled hills studded with black jackpines. He crossed the ZU's irrigated river bottom acres, where alfalfa and grain crops and native hay made a patchwork of green.

Moffat Sherman's up-to-date buildings stood among the cottonwoods, the many-windowed, two-storied main house white and red against the green of the tall trees. This was the finest ranch in the entire country, this was the place where Jim Scope could make his future home—if he wished.

Hired men were at work at the corrals, and apparently Moffat Sherman had just driven home from town with his chestnut Morgan buggy team. He had turned the team over to one of the men, and was about to saunter to the house with the mail sack and other items when he saw Jim Scope.

"Hello, Jim," he drawled. "I see Tex found you all right."

"Uh-huh. You're looking fine, Mr. Sherman." Jim stepped down and the rancher and the cowboy shook hands warmly. Moffat had grown stout with the years, and he wheezed when he did anything energetic. He was a grey, square-cut man, with square forehead, square chin, and grey eyes which had lost much of their fire yet could still look right through a fellow.

Marrying late in life, he'd been fifty when Ella was born. She was twenty-three, so—jiminy! Moffat Sherman must be in his seventies, and although Jim Scope had said he looked fine, he didn't. He looked plain bad.

"Bert," said the rancher to the hand who was unhitching the team, "take Jim's horse to the barn."

Jim saw Bert cock his eye at him and grin crookedly. Bert, like nearly all the rest of the hands, held a thinly masked contempt for the cowboy. A fellow'd be smart to feather his nest the easy way, yet wasn't such a fellow just a damn fortune hunter?

Jim took some of the packages from Sherman and the rancher fished a letter from the mail sack and handed it to Jim. The cowboy saw that it was from his father and, wondering how much he wanted this time, shoved it into his inside vest pocket.

TO THE big boss he then spoke of conditions on the range and how the cattle which had been in his charge were doing. Moffat Sherman nodded. "I suppose you would have liked to stay on that job. But—" He looked at Bert significantly. Bert took the hint, shrugged and moved away with the team and Jim's saddle horse.

Jim's eyes met those of his boss. "Why did you send for me?"

"Ella will tell you all about it. She wanted to see you, said she just had to see you. Jim—"

"Yes?"

"Don't let stiff-necked or stupid pride stand in your way. My girl's happiness means everything to me. Everything."

"I realize that, sir."

"I don't know why she's nuts about you. I suppose it's one of those things. . . . You do love her, don't you, Jim?"

"Yes, but—"

"It's fortunate that I like you, Jim. You're steady. You've got what it takes to be a real cowman. You do realize that once you're my son-in-law I'd expect you to do all the work I've been doing? You'll have not one but two heavy responsibilities. *Two.* Understand?"

"I think so, Mr. Sherman."

"All right. Go on to the house. I'll putter around in the blacksmith shop for a while."

Jim Scope's head was spinning. Never until now had this grand old man told him frankly that he approved of him, and that he'd expect him to take over active management of the outfit. Was that only because beautiful, headstrong Ella had been able to

twist her father to her wishes? Jim Scope was far too modest to believe that he was the perfect answer to a desirable young woman's dream. He wasn't homely, and he did cut a good figure on horseback, but he marveled that Ella Sherman should have such fondness for him. "One of those things," Sherman had just said.

The housekeeper opened the living room door, gave Jim Scope a teasing smile and said, "Time you got here. You'll find her in there," indicating the den with a jerk of her head.

Jim Scope set down his hat and his packages and rapped on the door. His pulses were leaping, his heart jumping crazily. The last time he'd seen Ella he had said sternly, "Let's be sensible about this. After I've gone out to the cow camp you'll realize that I don't really matter to you at all."

Ella, being a creature of strange whims and fancies, as Jim had learned, for once had been practical. "Okay. We'll see how that works out."

Now, opening the door, she reproached him. "What kept you so long?"

Jim didn't answer. There she was, slim and brunette, wearing a dress of some shiny dark material which clung to her figure and rustled when she moved, and high-heeled slippers on her small feet. Her eyes were dark and compelling. Her hair was dressed high in a new fashion which Jim didn't like. As the cowpunchers would have said, she was dolled up and dressed to kill. Like a half-million dollar gal had ought to be.

"Why are you staring at me, Jim? Have I changed so much? How do you like my dress?"

"You fill it mighty nice, Ella."

"Thank you, darling. Now come and kiss me."

"Honest, I'm scared to."

"Afraid to kiss me? Jim, your going away was a good idea. I've learned you're the one and only forever. And listen, Jim. I've planned a wonderful trip for us to the Pacific Coast and Hawaii. We'll be married quietly and—"

"Not—not so fast, Ella." Jim felt definitely uncomfortable, for although she was lovely and desirable, and he longed to crush her in his arms, the storm in his mind between two conflicting forces wouldn't let him do it. "If we do get married, Ella, I'll have to run this outfit. Your dad's not well. Not quite up to it any more."

IN ELLA'S eyes sparks were flashing. "Don't be silly! Dad'll manage. If it's necessary he can hire a good foreman. . . . I'm sick of this stupid life here. We'll visit the exciting places I've wanted to and—"

Jim broke in. "You know I haven't the money for that."

"You've brought that up before, darling. Listen! If I wanted a rich man, I could have one. But none of the ones I know interest me, while you're a handsome male a girl can show off with pride."

Jim Scope's tongue stumbled as he repeated. "A girl can show off? I'm no prize specimen to show off."

Ella's pretty mouth drew into a pout. "You're being selfish, Jim. You're not considering me or my wishes or my future."

She came close to him, threw one lovely arm around his neck, and looked up into his eyes with her own wide and appealing. Then she lowered her lashes and smiled, an entrancing smile. "Be nice. Think of us, surf bathing at Waikiki! That's something I've dreamed of doing—"

"Loafing our lives away on your dad's money?" said Jim in an odd tone. "Me, like a pet seal, being shown off by my wife? Damn it! I'd hate myself."

"Oh no! Not if you love me enough."

"Do you love me, Ella?"

"Yes. I love you so much that I want to take you away from all this dust and wind and grief with horses and cattle—"

"Ella, if you love me enough to make a go of it with me, you'll listen to my idea of how our marriage ought to be worked out."

Ella took her arm away and stepped back, eyes again flashing dangerously. "If you expeect me to bury myself here while you step into Dad's shoes and work like a fool, Jim, I won't even talk about it. I have everything planned, and it seems to me you would be considerate enough—"

"Stop right there!" Jim interrupted and was surprised by the harshness of his voice. "I want you to know I'd hoped we could work this out. But what you ask just won't work. Good-by, Ella."

Jim didn't know how white his face was as he pulled on his hat and walked swiftly to the blacksmith shop where Moffat Sherman was still puttering around. The cowman looked at him steadily, shrewdly, and clear through him. "So it's all off, Jim? I don't know whether I'm glad or sorry."

"I know I'm sorry it had to come out like this. I'll be wrangling my own pony out of the pasture. Will you make out my time to now?"

"If you feel you must go. . . ."

AFTER Jim had wrangled and saddled the only horse he owned, he had another word with the grand old cowman of the ZU. Without looking at the check, he slid it into his pocket, along with the unopened letter from his father, and held out his hand.

"I hope this won't hurt Ella too badly."

A slight smile crossed Moffat Sherman's features. "Jim, I think a heap more of you than I did. Don't worry about Ella. So long, Jim, and good luck."

Jim rode away with a queer lump in his throat and a mixture of emotions boiling in his mind, for, after all, he had thrown away the chance of a lifetime, yet there was in him also a surging elation that he had kept his freedom and could hold up his head among men everywhere.

Heading toward Turock, he stopped on a hill and looked back at the great ZU ranch. Where would he go now? Something was pulling his gaze off into the distance to search for a certain dry-lander's shack, but it was not quite visible from there.

Down among those hills of shifting sand a brave girl was living all alone, and suddenly he knew he had never really loved Ella. He realized that Kit had been under the surface of his mind all during that final scene with Ella. Somehow it had been the thought of Kit that had kept him from giving in.

Now the girl at the dry-lander's cabin seemed to be pulling him toward her. He moved his horse forward a few yards and then reined up, thinking, I've nothing to offer Kit Swinton. Probably I'll have to send my folks this last little pay check too.

Reaching into his pocket he drew it out and smiled in surprise when he saw the check was for eighty dollars. That made a good stake.

Swiftly Jim Scope opened his father's letter and read it. Then he went back to one line: "The money you've sent so far, son, has put your mother and me on our feet. We can make out fine, so save for yourself whatever you make from here on."

Pocketing letter and check, Jim shoved his pony along down through the hills to the hopeless ranch of Kit Swinton.

KIT WAS by the well when Jim drew up. "Why'd you come back?" she asked, and without waiting for an answer, said despairingly, "Jim, it's gone dry. The well's dry!"

"Dry, Kit?"

"Yes." She was wholly still, looking into space, her lips tight. "This means I—I can't stay here."

Jim Scope slid out of his saddle and stepped close to her. "Kit, I didn't want you to stay here anyhow. There's still my mountain valley, you know."

"You didn't stay there yourself. . . . Why did you come back—here?"

"You drew me back. I came to you because I love you."

Jim's arm went around Kit's shoulders, but she threw it off and backed away. "No! They—everybody says that you and Ella Sherman—"

"Kit, dear, believe me there's been no real love on either side. Now it's ended, and I'm moving on. But, Kit, I have a wild dream that, if you are willing to go with me, we'll load your things in your wagon and hook up your team, tie the cow and my horse behind and—I've made up a little rhyme about it.

We're headin' to our valley in the mountains
Where the water's fresh and sweet from nature's fountains—

Sort of silly, isn't it?"

"No, Jim. It's lovely. Oh, how I long for a drink of good water! Jim, did you really mean we'd go together?"

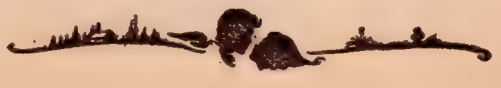
Jim swooped and caught her and held her close in his arms. When at last he let her go he said, "I think that answers your question, darling—if you will go with me."

"I want to, Jim. More than anything in the world. . . ."

"We'll make a stop in town to see the minister. I'm afraid the ring won't be much, honey."

"I don't care. Oh, Jim, I'm so happy it hurts."

Jim Scope looked off over her head, thinking of what might have been his fate if he hadn't stopped here earlier today and talked with Kit. "Me too!" he murmured. "Me too!"



TIMBERMAN'S GOAL

By RAY TOWNSEND

STANDING in the freshly fallen snow of the street, Quaid Mitchell faced the couple in the half-curtained rig that had pulled aside from the sluggish, early morning traffic through the little timber town of Mattole Falls. Anger stirred, Mitchell forced his glance past the girl to the man who sat beside her on the smooth leather seat.

"I've said all I'm going to say, Santee!" Quaid's breath clouded before his face in the bitter cold air. "If you're going along with Keller that's your lookout! But you can't play it both ways, understand? And I promise you this—" Quaid's voice lowered, but there was no softness in the sound— "I'm pulling no punches in this fight! If you get in my way I'll treat you just like I'd treat Keller or Swanson, you understand? I won't say this again, Ross, and don't you forget it!"

Ross Santee's good-looking, blond features were scowl-

IF QUAID had really lost Gale when she married another man

perhaps then he might have gone on loving her forever. . . .

ing as he returned the look, his usual, bluff heartiness dwindling beneath the certainty of the words. He said nothing. Mitchell turned to go then, a wide, lean man in a heavy sheepskin coat and loggers' boots, the straight black line of his brows drawn together, eyes piercing and humorless in the set planes of his face.

But now the girl's voice came, holding him half-turned in the street. "You listen to me, *Mister* Mitchell!" And the low fury of her tone brought Quaid's eyes around, turning him again to the buggy.

He had to face her squarely, this Gale Santee. Gale Fowler she had been. Gale Mitchell, Quaid had once planned for her to be. But Gale had married Ross Santee instead, less than a month after the big blond man had come to the lower Mattole and bought out her father's mill. There was quick, additional anger in Quaid, as he studied the pale beauty of her features and remembered again how he'd tried to raise the money for the Fowler sawmill himself. But in the end he'd lost both the mill and the raven-haired, eager girl he had already counted as his own.

"You talk big for a common timberjack, Quaid Mitchell! Why, if it weren't for Dad you'd still be drawing a faller's pay—and lucky to get it! All you have is the timber rights to a few thousand feet of pine and spruce and a handful of broken down loggers! You're impertinent to try to undercut a big businessman like Mr. Keller. You have no right to throw your weight around and threaten Ross like the bully and coward you are!"

"Gale—please—" There was embarrassment and shame in Ross Santee's handsome face. Quaid remembered that Santee was a San Francisco man, a man of breeding, a gentleman, so-called.

There was little gentleness in the voice of the girl he had married. "And what's more, you've floated your last log into the Fowler pond! Ross has signed his agreement with Keller and Swanson, and for all we care you can pick your teeth with your scraggly timber! Frank Keller and Lars Swanson can supply all the footage we can handle, as well as keeping their own mill busy! Between us, we own the Mattole, timberjack! Why don't you try mining or something? I think you'd look much better in flat heels and a shovel in your hands! You're about as capable as most muckers anyway! Let's go, Ross!"

Ross Santee, face crimson, slap-reined the mare out into the slush of the street. Quaid Mitchell stood watching the rig as it joined the slow-moving traffic along the town's three-block length. He drew a breath then, realizing that his own anger was gone, that even his bitterness had turned to futility.

"Hello, handsome!"

The voice was laughingly familiar, casual and filled with the healthy good humor of habitual amusement. At the walk's edge he grinned in spite of himself at Cissie Fowler's impudent face. He had never seen her any other way, this younger, lively-eyed girl who was Gale Santee's sister. She was dressed flauntingly in men's clothes, the lithe shape of her body in the sheepskin, woolen shirt and levis suggesting the clean-cut lines of a sixteen-year-old boy rather than a girl nearing her twenty-first birthday.

"I guess she really told you what stage to take, didn't she? It's a good thing it's cold this morning, Quaid. You might have got those handsome eyebrows of yours singed!"

"You're a sneaking little minx who's going to get her eye blacked from peeking through keyholes one day, kid Fowler!" Quaid laughed, realizing suddenly that he'd not laughed for weeks—nor, come to think of it, had he seen Cissie Fowler for weeks. Nor Ben either, for that matter.

"How is Ben, honey? And what've you been doing with yourself? Haven't had you in my hair up at the camp for so long it don't seem natural."

He walked along beside her toward the buckboard near the corner and felt the new quiet that came over the girl.

"Dad's going to die, Quaid." She said the words quite simply, with no hint of emotion nor sadness. "He knows it as well as I do and as well as Doc Winters. He's over sixty, Quaid. Never had a sick day in

his life. But he's going to die. Quaid, I'm sure of it, unless—"

SHE TURNED then, as they reached the buckboard. And in the deep, clear blue of her eyes Quaid saw, suddenly the sure, adult control in this Cissie Fowler he had always regarded as a child.

"Quaid, I wish Dad had never sold the mill," she said then. "It was the worst thing he could do. And I don't mean the money, either. What good's a few thousand dollars put by for your old age if you're not going to have any old age? What Ben Fowler needs is that mill, Quaid! The work, the worry, the fuming, the cussing and the interest. To hell with the money!"

Quaid ran his palm over the day-old stubble along his jaw. "I see what you mean, kid. But the way things stand—"

The girl clambered up onto the high seat of the wagon, her eyes sparkling down at him. "Things really are standing, aren't they? Dad's got more money than he needs and no work. And you've got no money and all work. But neither one of you have a mill."

And as he looked up at her, grinning, Quaid sensed suddenly that there seemed to be more to her look than the mere smile she gave him, but he didn't know what. "Tell Ben I'll be out to see him tonight or tomorrow night. Meant to before this, but you know how it is."

"Sure, sure, I know how it is!" The girl laughed abruptly. "Things only have to go on about two or three centuries under your nose before you get the drift! Damn you, I've been trying for years to—"

She broke off suddenly, shaking her head in a brief, sharp motion. And then, unbelievingly, Quaid Mitchell realized that Cissie Fowler had not been laughing at all. All the time she'd been talking and joking there had been this hint of tears beneath. And now her eyes were angry, blue-angry, and glinting at him as she spoke.

"Listen, you prize fool of the Mattole! Did it ever occur to you that mills can be built as well as bought? Dad's dying because he hasn't a mill! You're going broke for the same reason! I don't know which one of you has less brains! Sure, you'll be out to see him—the day you ride out to the graveyard and put flowers in front of Ben Fowler's headstone! And you'll probably have to steal the flowers at that! Giddap, you mangy piece o' crowbait, before I tear this bonehead apart with my lily-white hands!"

And for the second time that morning Quaid Mitchell was left standing in the center of town, frowning as he watched a daughter of his old friend, Ben Fowler, drive off along the street.

But now, as he turned back toward the hash house and breakfast. Quaid was remembering hazily what had brought him to town. He'd come down from the camp on the upper Mattole with the intention of seeing old man Wentworth at the bank. But as he gulped the steaming coffee the bland-eyed Oriental set before him on the counter, Quaid Mitchell turned Cissie Fowler's words again in his mind, and it came to him that perhaps she'd been right. Maybe he was the prize fool of the Mattole.

BEN FOWLER. Funny he'd never thought of the old man wanting—almost needing—to get back in business that way. Quaid shook his head slowly. It would be best that way—for both him and Ben. Still, it smacked too closely of charity on Ben's part. Fowler would be putting up all the money, if they went together on the thing.

He remembered the time Old Ben had made the proposition flat out. "Hang on to your timberland," Ben had said. "Work into the mill end easy-like. Hell, boy, in a few years you'll be running the Mattole with your left hand. The way Frank Keller and Swanson are operating down here on the lower river, they won't have enough sticks to prop up an outhouse in another five years! I want you to come in with me, Quaid. I never had a son and—well—I just want you to have the mill, that's all. I think your old man would have liked it that way, too, boy."

Your old man! Quaid sat, staring sightlessly as the apron-bellied Chinese padded

up behind the counter with the coffee pot, filling the thick white mug before him.

Ben Fowler and Sam Mitchell had pioneered the Mattole. The timber had been there for the taking. They'd snaked it out, whipsawing great stacks of raw lumber with the crude, simple sawmills they'd each erected. There'd been no trouble then. Ben Fowler and Sam Mitchell had always been friends. But finding a market, a paying market, for the lumber they'd produced had been another thing. Both men had gone deeply into debt for their equipment, for wages they had to pay, for supplies, camp maintenance and a hundred and one odds and ends of expense that accumulated between the falling of a hundred-foot stick and the receipt of cash for the lumber it produced.

Frank Keller, with his ferret-sharp eye for profit, had stepped off the San Francisco stage one day. For the exchange of Sam Mitchell's signature on a simple note, he'd lifted the debt, assumed immediate overhead, and provided an open and even anxious market. Six months later, when business was slow again, he'd foreclosed, and Sam Mitchell had found himself without a mill, all his timber rights on the lower Mattole in Keller's name, and only the untouched and, at the time, unwanted footage of the upper watershed in his own possession. Keller had brought Lars Swanson down from Canada to run the woods end.

Sam Mitchell, loaded with liquor, anger and a sixgun he hardly knew how to use, had slammed into the mill office two mornings after he'd been dispossessed. He faced Frank Keller and Lars Swanson. It had gone beyond words and Sam Mitchell had taken a bullet from his own gun in the fight and had died, leaving his son Quaid, at eighteen, in possession of several million feet of untouched timber on the slopes of the upper Mattole. Quaid had made his start anew, stick by stick, hiring only the few loggers he could afford to pay cash, floating the timbers down the fifty miles or so to the Fowler mill, across and upstream from the booming Keller and Swanson layout.

And ten years later Quaid was sitting on a stool in the hash house in Mattole Falls, grinding his teeth together and fighting suddenly against a hatred he thought he had licked.

Quaid wrenched his thoughts from Keller and the white-thatched giant Swanson, taking up knife and fork as the Chinese set a two-foot platter of ham, eggs and flapjacks before him. He ate automatically, not tasting the food.

YES, HE was the prize fool, all right. He'd let his chance at the Fowler mill get away, to say nothing of allowing his own obstinacy to drive Gale into Santee's arms, losing himself the girl he'd counted on for so long. And now—blood raised slowly beneath the weathered burn of his face as he remembered the threat he'd laid upon Ross Santee only half an hour before. God, how stupid could a man get?

Santee had bought the Fowler mill because Fowler had wanted to sell—and at a good price. Santee had married Gale because he'd been taken with the girl, she'd allowed herself to be courted, and had accepted him.

Ross Santee was all right! And Quaid's fruitless, unwanted anger turned now wholly upon himself. Hell, what else could Ross Santee do but sign with Keller? He hadn't acquired enough timberland to keep the mill he'd bought busy. Keller and Swanson between them owned practically the whole damned country by now! Squeezing Santee out of the game would have been a chore for Frank Keller! Of course he signed!

Quaid Mitchell left the lunch room, his boots sounding sharp and firm as he went along the boardwalk toward the stable where he'd left his horse.

He'd thrown saddle across the leggy claybank mare he had ridden down from the camp on the upper Mattole, and was walking the animal through the drafty, barnlike stable to the wide door when he saw the open rig pull in. A freak break in the high, scudding overcast momentarily bared the sun. For the brief moment before the man spoke, Quaid's eyes were

He saw his own death in the black eyes above the derringer

blind against the heatless, jabbing brilliance the sunshine made.

"Well, Mitchell, so you came down at last, eh?" It was Keller, Frank Keller, alone in the rig, an unbent and unbending man. "I've been expecting you to show up here in the Falls, Mitchell. Pretty tough, trying to get work out of a crew with nothing but a promise and a prayer, eh?"

As always when he faced Frank Keller, Quaid sensed the man's subconscious resentment toward a world of large men. It was, he knew, the man's prime motivation in life—the will to dominate, to rule in spite of his size. A large man himself, Quaid felt no superiority for the disparity of size between them. His dislike of Frank Keller was for the nature of the man himself—the cocksure, cynical egotism he saw there.

He squinted up at the man now and said, "I hear you're running yourself out of sticks, Keller. When you get down to buckbrush and manzanita let me know. I might let you have a few thousand feet, to keep the rust off your saws. At my price, of course."

He brought the horse up and stepped into the saddle, seeing the quick anger of glinting black eyes in the man's narrow face as he changed position.

"You're a cocky man, Mitchell. Maybe you won't be so cocky when you've talked to Wentworth at the bank!" There was the hidden sound of triumph in the man's voice and for a second caution stabbed up in Quaid before he remembered Cissie's words and the new decision he'd made.

"No," Keller was saying, "I don't think you'll be so cocky when you find out the Union Trust has discontinued its charity to the Mitchell clan! I've dabbled a bit in the banking business since last season, Mitchell, and Wentworth's coming to me these days! And the way I see it, the bank can't afford to advance good money to a man with no market for his product!"

"I don't owe the bank a cent, Keller." Quaid's voice was mild.

"Not actually, perhaps." The man scowled. "But you haven't got a cent, either. You had a bad year, Mitchell! Your supplies and equipment for this season alone have just about eaten up your balance! How do you expect to pay your men next spring—that is, if you can get any of them to stick it out that long with them knowing you're broke? You've got no market for your sticks! I've got Santee and the Fowler mill under contract to take nothing but my timber! You're through, Mitchell! Just as through as your old man was! For your own sake I hope you won't be as hard to convince!"

For one brief second as he sat there looking across at the man in the bright, cold morning, Quaid felt the quick rush of old hate, the bitter enmity that had held him in its grip for so many long months following his father's death. It was almost a physical thing, this gripping, teeth-clenching hate. Abruptly then the high, unseen cloud-mass closed off the sky once more, obscuring the sun and leaving the softer light of an early winter day.

Quaid Mitchell relaxed and looked almost with pity at the little man on the buckboard seat. He laughed then and said, "You go to hell!" and reined off abruptly through the slush of the street, feeling pleasure at the cold, speechless fury he knew he was leaving behind.

QUAID MITCHELL made the run to San Francisco by stage after talking over with Ben Fowler the possibilities of erecting a new mill on the lower Mattole. The older man had received a fair price for his old layout, but when the two of them had got down to figures, computing the original cost of new equipment, transport by water to the mouth of the Mattole or over the high-flung ranges of mountains by freighter, plus labor and actual erection costs, they'd realized how deeply into debt they'd have to go before the new mill could hook its first log out of the pond. But with Quaid's crew now eating more deeply into the upcountry stand of giant timber, axe-bits flashing from half a dozen falling areas above the upper Mattole, the two men knew they'd have to be ready with the mill by spring or face the bankruptcy Keller predicted.

The regretful, half-smiling refusals Quaid had met in the banking and timber investment company offices of San Francisco had been a thing they'd not even suspected. The personal credit of Benjamin Fowler and Quaid Mitchell had never before been questioned.

Fowler, on hearing the news Quaid had brought, came out of his chair abruptly, stalking across his living room, and jabbing savagely at the air with the pointed tip of the closely clipped grey beard he wore.

"Damn it, Quaid!" the man bellowed. "This thing don't even make sense! I've been milling timber on the Mattole for nearly twenty years! And you say this upstart, this two-bit fourflusher, Keller, has been able to put the Indian sign on my personal credit! There's something here we don't see, boy! Something bigger than Keller! Hell, Evans, of Golden Gate Timber, has known me since the day I set up my first saw!"

But Quaid's own first anger and bewilderment at being refused credit had dissipated itself during the days in the city and throughout the trip north. He glanced past the square-bodied, smaller man now, exchanging glances with Cissie Fowler as she sat, listening, on the arm of a deep chair at one side of the huge fireplace.

He looked back at Ben and said, "Yes, there is more, Ben." He paused a second, framing in his mind the words to tell the man what he'd learned. "It's Santee, Ben," he went on. "Keller has evidently been taking advantage of the fact of his new contract with Ross Santee. And the Santee name—in San Francisco, at least—" He shrugged expressively.

Ben Fowler drew up in his pacing of the room, staring. "Do you mean to tell me that that young whippersnapper son-in-law of mine has used his family's influence to cut my throat? Why, by God, I'll break that sniveling younker so far out of the timber game it'll make him sick to look at a toothpick! Marry my own girl, and then stick a knife in my back! By God, it's about time I showed somebody how things stand on this damned river!"

Ben Fowler strode toward the hall, self-righteous in anger and somehow dignified in spite of the half limp that impeded his progress. "Come on, boy, if you got half the fight in you your old man had we'll whip these gents into line pronto! Otherwise I'll go it alone!"

"Quaid—" Cissie's voice was low, kept from the man in the hall as he bustled into mackinaw and boots. The outer door slammed and the man's steps went away across the porch.

"Let him go." Cissie's smile came up now and she wrinkled her nose at him. "He'll be all right now. He's got something to sink his teeth into. And the old geezer's really built like a bulldog, you know. I pity Ross when Dad gets to the mill."

Quaid frowned, watching the girl as she came up off the chair arm. She was not wearing man's clothes now. Quaid had no doubt that it was a woman's body beneath the white-and-blue printed dress she had on. Her hair was brushed and gleaming gold, shortly curling about her saucy, smiling face, as her eyes mocked him.

"Ross shouldn't have done it," he said.

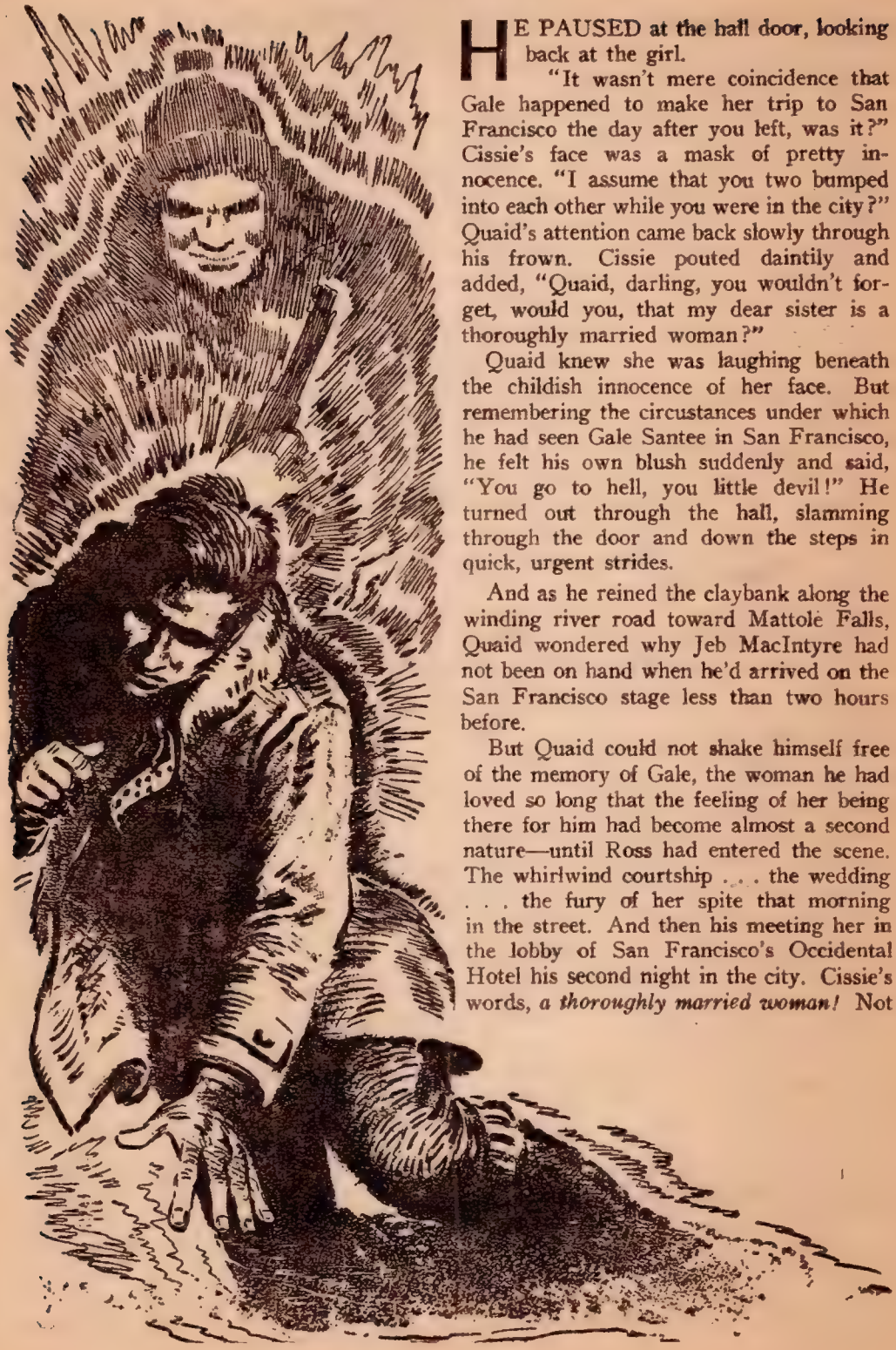
"You didn't expect him to kiss you after the way you talked to him the last time you saw him, did you? And there's more! Jeb MacIntyre's in town."

"Jeb MacIntyre?" MacIntyre was Quaid's woods boss, the man he'd left in charge when he'd come down from camp nearly three weeks before. "What in hell's Jeb doing in town? You little minx, you—if this's your idea of a joke—"

"Joke, my foot!" She was laughing at him now. "Something tells me you really got yourself some trouble this time. He's at the hotel and he said for you to look him up chop-chop if you cared anything about keeping a crew on the job upriver. Something about a man Keller sent up to offer your boys a little more money than you're paying them, I think."

"Keller!" Quaid turned on the word, heading out of the room, anger and sudden decision furrowing the square lines of his face.

"Quaid!"



HE PAUSED at the hall door, looking back at the girl.

"It wasn't mere coincidence that Gale happened to make her trip to San Francisco the day after you left, was it?" Cissie's face was a mask of pretty innocence. "I assume that you two bumped into each other while you were in the city?" Quaid's attention came back slowly through his frown. Cissie pouted daintily and added, "Quaid, darling, you wouldn't forget, would you, that my dear sister is a thoroughly married woman?"

Quaid knew she was laughing beneath the childish innocence of her face. But remembering the circumstances under which he had seen Gale Santee in San Francisco, he felt his own blush suddenly and said, "You go to hell, you little devil!" He turned out through the hall, slamming through the door and down the steps in quick, urgent strides.

And as he reined the claybank along the winding river road toward Mattole Falls, Quaid wondered why Jeb MacIntyre had not been on hand when he'd arrived on the San Francisco stage less than two hours before.

But Quaid could not shake himself free of the memory of Gale, the woman he had loved so long that the feeling of her being there for him had become almost a second nature—until Ross had entered the scene. The whirlwind courtship . . . the wedding . . . the fury of her spite that morning in the street. And then his meeting her in the lobby of San Francisco's Occidental Hotel his second night in the city. Cissie's words, *a thoroughly married woman!* Not

so thoroughly, that night, he remembered bitterly.

Quaid saw again the soft-eyed glance, the full, vivid mouth of Gale Santee. He'd taken her to dinner that night. And the next. That was all. There'd been nothing to it, actually.

Nothing to it. No, nothing a man could put his finger on, perhaps. Nothing, even, that Ross himself could have objected to, had he been there. But even now, as the mare took the last rise below town in its loping stride, Quaid felt again the discomfort, the almost furtive feeling of guilt he had had when it had occurred to him in San Francisco what Gale Santee had been after—and to what lengths she would have gone to gain her ends.

Quaid Mitchell had told Ben Fowler that it had been the influence of the Santee name that had ruined their credit. What he had not been able to bring himself to tell the old timberjack was that his own daughter had wielded the strength of her husband's name against her father.

It had been at dinner that second night in San Francisco that Quaid had seen for the first time the lust for power, the need to domineer, that smouldered in the depths of Gale's dark eyes.

And now, as in all the days since that night, Quaid Mitchell realized how ugly that conversation had been. Gale Santee had wanted Quaid to give up the idea of joining her father in erecting a new mill on the Mattole. She wanted her father to stay out of business entirely. And, as Quaid had seen when he'd finally evaluated her words and insinuations, Gale Santee had wanted Quaid himself in the background, signing, perhaps, some contract with Keller which she had hinted she might arrange. Her influence went everywhere.

GALE SANTEE, too, had wanted Quaid in her own background. There had been no doubt of this in the pretty come and go of the color in her face, in the lowered eyes, the fingertips brushing his hand upon the white linen cloth of the table. She'd been like wine—rich, full-bodied, aglow.

Quaid swung down stiffly before the stable at the end of the street, handing the reins to the grinning youngster who came out to meet him, and stalking sourly across the slush toward the hotel as a fresh fall of snow sifted into the town.

She'd hit him hard across the face with the back of her hand there in the hallway, when he'd taken her to the door of her room. And he'd left her there, walking off with the taste of blood in his mouth where his lip had split against his teeth. He'd tried to tell her, show her how things stood. For the sake of the pride he felt in this woman he'd thought he'd known so well, he had tried to get out of it gracefully but she couldn't understand. He'd taken the blow and had left her there. That was all. He tried to shrug off the memory of the scene, as he walked up the stairs in the hotel.

Jeb MacIntyre was in the room Quaid kept reserved for himself and whoever of his crew might be in town during the on-season. He was lying full length on the floor beyond the bed, face down, calk boots showing their spikes in the blind-drawn dimness. Jeb MacIntyre was forever dead.

HALF AN HOUR later Quaid Mitchell found Frank Keller in his office at the Mattole Falls Lumber and Milling Company at the edge of its huge backwater pond a mile above town. With Keller was the towering, strap-chested Lars Swan-

He knew he was falling. Blackness closed in before he hit the floor

son, and Ross Santee, looking somehow too immaculate in the expensive plaid mackinaw and whipcord breeches he wore.

Quaid himself had slammed across the outer office, jerking open the inner door without bothering to knock. It was evident that the three men had been disputing some matter between themselves, but Quaid's fury whiplashed his words across at the small man behind the desk, oblivious to whatever might have been transpiring within the room.

"You've made your last mistake, tinhorn!" In three strides he was past the desk, reaching for Keller, seeing calculation turn to fear in the man's eyes as his fist clamped the man's lapels together beneath his chin. And as Keller's arm moved, Quaid jerked him free of his chair, saying, "Touch that toy pistol you carry, and it'll be the last thing you ever touch! I'd enjoy killing you, Keller! Right now!"

The big woodsman started from his position on the far side of the desk, Quaid spoke again, without taking his eyes from the bloodless, narrow features of the man in his grasp. "And if you don't think I can break his scrawny little neck, Swanson, just take one more step!"

"Lars!" Keller gasped the word warningly, his voice hoarse with fear and the choking proximity of Quaid Mitchell's fists at his throat.

"Just a minute, Mitchell." The calm, reasoning voice of Ross Santee further inflamed the fury in Quaid. "I know things are not exactly friendly all around, just now. But you can't just kill a man out of a clear blue sky this way."

"Clear blue sky!" For a single instant Quaid's glance stabbed across at Santee. "Is that how MacIntyre died? Out of a clear blue sky? You've sunk your bit in this bole, too, Santee! Maybe you can tell me more about who killed Jeb than this little rat I've got in my hands!"

"MacIntyre?" A frown of bewilderment formed above the serious blueness of his eyes.

Quaid had the feeling that Ross Santee knew nothing of Jeb's death. The blond man turned his glance in sudden suspicion upon the passive Frank Keller, but Quaid knew that his distrust and dislike of Santee would not change. They were opposite poles, Quaid Mitchell and Ross Santee, nor would it ever be different between them.

Santee said: "So you killed him, Frank. You couldn't let me work this thing out my way. Well, this does it as far as I'm concerned. You and I are through, Keller. I'll run my mill and my timber as I see fit. You can tear that contract up and go to hell for all of me!"

With a sudden motion Quaid jerked Frank Keller completely upright. And, reaching inside the man's coat, he relieved him of the snout-barrelled derringer he wore, dropping him abruptly into the swivel chair behind the desk. He swung on Ross Santee, warning Lars Swanson with his eyes and a brief motion of the gun in his hand.

"You don't have to make a lot of talk for my benefit, Santee!" he said. "All three of you are going along with me for a little powwow with Sheriff Drake! And I'm telling you this, buckos, somebody's neck's going to get stretched over this little job, and that's for sure!"

"Just a minute, Quaid." Santee lifted an expensively booted foot to the seat of the straight-backed chair beside him, leaning an elbow on his knee casually. "I'll tell you this—I saw Jeb MacIntyre myself, less than two hours ago! And when I left him in your room at the hotel he was as live as he ever was! Now wait a minute! There's more!" He cut Quaid off with a gesture.

"Jeb MacIntyre sent word across the river that he wanted to see me. When I came in, he told me Keller had sent two men up to hire all the fallers he could get out of your crews at double the wages we've all been paying! Not too many had left, but he'd got worried about it, and left the camp in charge of young Sheldon, heading down here to get you back upriver. It was on his way down, he said, when he was cutting through that virgin stand of yours above the big bend, that he got on to what Keller was really doing. He said

they were back in that long draw below the bend itself—"

"All right!" It was Frank Keller's voice.

Quaid cursed as he swung, realizing he'd given the man his shoulder as he'd stood listening to Ross Santee. Somehow Keller had got his hand on another gun from the desk, and as Quaid came fully around he found himself staring into the deadly, gaping barrel of the weapon, seeing the poised hammer on full cock and the sheer, cold murder in the gleaming black eyes above.

The derringer made a dull clatter on the floor at his feet. But as he stood there, not breathing, sure the bullet would come, he realized abruptly that the huge Lars Swanson was now at his back.

The blow took him behind the ear and light exploded before his eyes. Quaid Mitchell knew he was falling, and blackness closed in before he felt the floor.

FOR THE first time in nearly a week the day was dawning bright and clear. The crowd of loggers turned and moved away from the high mess-hall porch, their breaths steaming up in the crisp air as they walked away through the freshly fallen knee-depth of snow, muttering and calling out to each other. Quaid drew the first easy breath he'd taken in the past four days. He leaned hands on the railing of the porch, drawing the cold, mountain air deeply into his lungs and looking out over the rise and fall of timbered land that dropped off to the river beyond, rising abruptly in the further distance to the saw-tooth, forested range in the north.

This was the country of the upper Mattole, Quaid Mitchell's base camp, commanding a view of more than half the fifty downriver miles toward Mattole Falls. From the near edge of the camp clearing, down and across and to the river's last hidden bend westward, the stately, mature pines thrust their towering, snow-laden spires skyward in the morning sun. The whole, vast watershed of the upper Mattole lay gleaming, in the brittle, unmoving air.

A lone timberjack hesitated below Quaid, his features serious and lined.

"We won't have no more trouble with the boys, Quaid," he said, looking up at the dark-haired man on the porch. "Ain't a one of them but liked Jeb MacIntyre, and that's for sure. And they'll get out the sticks now, too, don't you worry none about that! And if any more of Keller's men show up—" The man shook his head significantly as he turned to follow one of the several crews which had moved off in different directions across the yard.

Yes, they'd get out the sticks. Quaid knew that much. They were good men, most of them, and for a moment he'd had to talk fast to keep a few of Jeb MacIntyre's closer friends from striking out downriver on the spot. Right now Frank Keller, or any Keller man for that matter, would find things pretty hot if he ventured into the upper Mattole. But actually, Quaid knew, there had been no proof in the matter of MacIntyre's death and he'd told them so.

He saw a sleigh, pulling out of the snow-clad timber around the bend of the road below camp. The sorrel mare in its harness had evidently sensed the end of its journey, quickening in a trot that raised the sound of the runners into a higher purr upon the crusted snow and swinging up across the clearing in a stride that brought the girl's laugh from the sleigh itself and a quick tightening of the reins as she pulled up before the porch.

"Hello, handsome!" Cissie Fowler's laughter came again, the clear, healthy laughter of a girl young and flushed of face and vital with the love of living and of life. Quaid dropped down the steps of the porch, eyebrows frowning at the girl as he neared the sleigh.

"What the hell're you doing up here, kid? If you ask me, you look like bad news in sheep's clothing!"

"Why, Quaid, darling!" The girl's smile mocked him. "I'll bet if I were Gale you wouldn't say a nasty thing like that, would you?" Quaid grimaced impatiently, feeling discomfort in spite of himself at her reference to Gale.

"You are getting clever, though, Quaid," she said. "I am bad news. It's trouble.

Quaid! It's trouble between Dad and Ross and Gale! And somehow Frank Keller is always cropping up right in the middle of it. Ever since the day Dad and Sheriff Drake walked in on the fight you had in Keller's office—and especially since Gale came back from San Francisco—things have been going from bad to worse! I wish you hadn't left so quickly, Quaid. Oh, I know you had to get back up here and make sure that everything was running all right—with Jeb gone and all. But, Quaid, I wish you could come back downriver for a while! Dad's so mad most of the time he's running around like a drunk timberjack! Oh, he's all right physically! The whole thing's done him a lot of good that way, I guess. But he doesn't have the sense of direction he once did. He'd never admit it, Quaid, but with the way Ross is acting—and Gale, too—he needs you! And the way he's threatening to gunwhip Frank Keller and Lars Swanson. . . . Quaid, I'm afraid!"

He went, of course. There was nothing else he could do. In fact, he'd intended to return to Mattole Falls as soon as he'd set things right on the upriver end. And the mill was still the big thing. He had to have an outlet for his timber, whether Ben Fowler got back in business again or not.

Nothing was settled on the downriver end.

ROSS SANTEE had gone surly. In spite of his dislike of everything Santee stood for, Quaid had to admit to himself that the gentleman timberman from San Francisco had always been forthright and open in his dealings and in his talk. But as he faced Santee across the desk in the office of the mill he'd bought from Ben Fowler, Quaid sensed a new furtiveness in the man.

"Well, by God, man—" Quaid's anger flamed abruptly— "I wish you'd make up your mind where you stand in this thing! A week ago you told Keller you were washed up, as far as he was concerned! You accused him outright of being responsible for Jeb MacIntyre's death! You even gave away the fact that Keller's men have been pirating my timber above the bend! When I went upriver after that little set-to in Keller's office everything you told me seemed to tally. Keller's boys had been there the way you said and someone'd been falling timber near the bend! I've taken care of both deals on that end, but, by God, Santee, we're going to have a little showdown around here! You put your two cents worth in that day, but everything

you've done since has added up to nothing more nor less than Keller!"

And suddenly Ben Fowler was on his feet, hobbling across the room from the leather chair in which he'd been sitting, brushing his younger daughter off as she attempted to restrain him.

"Listen to me, you young city-bred whelp! If I'd known what kind of varmint I was lettin' into the fold I'd of cut off my arm before I ever let you marry a girl of mine—not to mention sellin' you the mill in the first place!" The old man was breathing heavily as he leaned across the desk, glaring at Ross Santee's flaming features.

"But that's water under the bridge now! The point is, younker, that when I get on that stage this afternoon you're going to be sittin' right alongside of me, understand? And when we get to San Francisco you're going to talk turkey to a few boys at Golden Gate Timber! And when you get through telling them what a dirty, lowdown skunk you are, you're going to sign this mill back to me for exactly the price you paid me in the first place, understand? Try ruining my credit, will you? By God,

when this story gets around down-bay there won't be a consumer on the coast would do a dime's worth of business with anyone by the name of Santee!"

"Dad—please!" Cissie Fowler moved up behind her father, her eyes pleading with Quaid as he glanced down at the girl.

Ross Santee cleared his throat, and Quaid suddenly realized that here was a man faced with a situation he could not handle alone. Ross, perhaps, had been innocent of using the Santee name to ruin Ben Fowler's credit. It had been, after all, Gale who had used the name of Santee in pressure against her father and himself. Seeing the man's embarrassment now, Quaid realized that instead of denying his part in the affair Ross Santee was covering the actions of his wife and trying to maintain a position that had become untenable. As the man spoke Quaid found himself suddenly wondering about the life of this man with Gale Santee—the girl Quaid himself had thought he had known so well and had found he'd known so little.

"Ben, I—" Santee was shaking his head slowly, not meeting either man's eyes. "I'm sorry that things have come out the way they have. But I've signed a contract with Keller to take only his timber. And I'm sorry, too, but—" there was, for one brief moment, something of spirit in the look he gave Ben—"I have no intention of selling out!"

BEN FOWLER sputtered sudden profanity as Cissie moved up to take his arm. Quaid said: "That's your right, Santee. It's your mill." His eyes bored into the man across the desk. "But there's a couple of sides to that San Francisco deal that only you and I know about." And he paused, knowing that Ross Santee would have to play in order to keep Gale's duplicity from her father. Quaid watched this consideration working in the man, sure that Gale had done the thing of her own accord. As he said, "I think you'll go along on the credit deal, Ross," he wondered if Ross Santee had the guts to fight, to back the play his wife had made, regardless of the right or wrong involved.

But the answer was there, plainly written in the man's blue eyes for Quaid to read. There was no fight in Ross Santee, only pain. Quaid Mitchell saw suddenly the torment in which Santee lived. For the first time understanding passed between the two men, understanding based upon a mutual knowledge of Gale Santee, the girl Ross had married and whom he now had to defend.

But before Santee could speak, the door at the rear of the office opened suddenly and Gale was there, imperious, the dark gleam of her eyes dominant against the heightened color of perfectly molded features. Frank Keller, cynical triumph in his narrow face, stepped in behind the girl and closed the door.

"Go ahead, Ross! Answer him!" There was triumph, too, in the voice of Gale Santee. "Are you going along on the credit deal?"

Santee's glance fell away once more, and the girl faced Quaid Mitchell. "You, Quaid! You're a hard man to convince, but you've had your chance! You tell him, Frank, I haven't the heart!"

"Listen, girl!" Ben Fowler's voice was suddenly ominous, beyond Quaid. "You skedaddle on out of here! And you too, young sis! We're going to have a showdown here, right now, and this is no place for a bunch of petticoats, understand?"

"No, Dad!" Cissie Fowler's voice was abruptly adamant. She was standing, head lifted, calmly meeting the amused glance of her older sister across the room. "If this is going to be a showdown, this is exactly where I belong! I've got a stake in this thing whether you or that big oaf standing beside you know it or not! Maybe if nothing else is accomplished, our dear, dear Gale might show her true colors at last! Yes, Gale, honey, Mr. Mitchell is indeed a hard gent to convince! Even your marriage to Ross didn't convince him! And I've been trying to for so long I'd almost given up hope! But now maybe you can do it for me at last!"

Gale paid no attention, turning impatiently to the narrow man beside her. "Go on, Frank, tell them where they stand!"

"It's like this, gents." Frank Keller moved further into the room.

"I'll be damned if it is!" Ben Fowler drew the sixgun from inside his coat. "I'm having no damned truck with any low, sneaking jackbox of a puppet like you, Keller! And if you're not off this side of the river in two seconds I'll blow you so full of holes—"

Quaid saw the pressure upon the trigger that the old man's fury was making. He moved abruptly, knocking the gun down in the same instant of the explosion, steadying Fowler with a hand on his shoulder as the bullet splintered the boarding at Keller's feet. Gunsmoke clouded the office, smarting eyelids as the sound of the shot died.

"Leave me be, Quaid, damn you!" The old man's ire was shaking through him like the palsy. Quaid forced him into the leather chair behind. "I'll show these upstarts who runs what around here!" Quaid had the gun then and he turned once more to face Frank Keller and the girl.

AND FOR the second time Quaid Mitchell found himself facing the ugly derringer in Frank Keller's hand, his own gun pointing loosely at the floor. He had not expected it, particularly after deflecting Ben's shot at the man, but he said, "I'm not dropping it this time, Frank. I don't think you've got the guts to pull that trigger!"

"Lars!" Keller's voice was a single, abrupt bark.

Gale Santee said urgently, "Don't be a fool, Quaid! You don't stand a chance! You've got no outlet for your timber! Frank was going to offer you a contract for every stick you can fall! At Keller and Santee prices, of course! And if you turn over that stand where Swanson's been working, below the bend upriver! You'll be working with us, Quaid! Don't be a fool!"

The door burst open behind Quaid, and he felt again the presence of the giant Swanson behind him, heard the man's grunt of satisfaction, and knew the gripping urgency to face in two directions at once.

Without warning Ross Santee said loudly, "Hold it, Swanson!" The man paused behind Quaid and Santee said, "It's no go, Gale! The whole thing's been rotten from the start! I didn't want to sign that contract with Keller in the first place! And when you went to San Francisco and—" He shook his head, his glance dropping once more to the desk behind which he was standing. "I'm going to sell the mill back to your father, Gale! We can live in San Francisco. I—I guess I wasn't cut out to be much of a timberman anyway. And, Quaid, I—"

But as Quaid met the humble apology in the man's upraised glance, he heard the decision of Frank Keller, at Santee's right.

"No, you don't! Not any of you!" The little man's eyes beaded blackly in the swarthiness of his face. "I've built this thing! I own the Mattole, understand? And no week-kneed sister is running out and leaving me to hold the bag! You're staying in, Santee, just as long as I need you, get that? You're signed with me and you take nothing but my timber! And you, Mitchell, you've got in my way just once too often! You'll sell, all right! Your whole damned tract, when Lars gets through with you! All right, Lars!"

"If you move one hair I'll sink this double-bitted axe right into your spine!" Cold fury was in Cissie's tone. "If you think I've been trying for years to break my dear sister's hold on Quaid Mitchell just to let you crack his neck when I think she's done it herself, think again, Lars Swanson!"

Quaid knew that Cissie Fowler, axe in hand, would prove no more than a temporary distraction for the huge, cat-footed Swanson. When the first sound of movement came, Quaid threw himself aside and down, coming up with the gun in his hand.

He was late, he knew, seeing his own death written in the black eyes above the derringer across the room. But in the split instant before the weapons roared, it was Ross Santee who charged Frank Keller, deflecting the man's aim in the moment's apprehension he had before triggering.

The two guns exploded together. But

Frank Keller died, the small narrowness of his body slamming back beneath the impact of the large-calibered slug that tore into his chest. The derringer's bullet tore splinters from the floor six inches in front of Quaid's knee. He came around with the gun, centering the wide-eyed Lars Swanson behind him, and Cissie Fowler stepped back, releasing her hold on the axe handle so that Swanson himself was left holding the instrument and looking suddenly bewildered and blank.

"Well, handsome," the girl said impudently as she stood looking at Quaid, "if I don't get you after all this, all I can say is there ain't no justice!"

Cissie Fowler got him all right. Quaid stood looking down at the girl a week later, seeing the pert features, the short, curling golden hair and the slim little figure of this woman he had married—or who had married him, as Cissie would always contend.

He grinned and said: "Well, baby, with Ross and Gale down in 'Frisco, you're going to be a pretty lonely gal this winter. Me, I got work waiting for me out there in the woods."

The girl's eyes came back from the placid, backwater pond that was beginning to freeze along the edge beyond the mill platform where they were standing. It was a clear, cold day, the fourth in the life of their marriage.

She wrinkled her nose at him suddenly, running her arm around him beneath the heavy mackinaw he wore and laying her cheek upon his chest as they stood there together. "I been lonely for you longer than you've any idea about! Kiss me, you prize fool of the Mattole! You may not know it, but I'm good in the woods, too! And in a lot more ways than you'd imagine!"

He kissed her. What else could he do?

Coming up in the next issue

The Treasure of San Felice

Only One Man Among the Frantic Fortune Seekers of the Gold Rush Days Saw the Riches Lying Above Ground. To Him There Was Wealth on the Green Grazing Land and Happiness on the Red Lips of a Beautiful Woman

A NEW SERIAL

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A SHORT STORY

By FRANK BONHAM

HUNTER'S INN

"Catch me, Red!" she cried

WITH trouble following at his heels like

a vicious cur that only he could handle,

Red Rocklyn knew that he must travel alone

By ALICE AXTELL

RED ROCKLYN came through the high hills and descended to the tiny settlement on Crazy Dog Creek. A good meal, a few supplies and grain for his horses were all he wanted, then on to the wide world of a wanderer.

But the first man he met, at the gate of the pole corral, shouted his name. "Say, if your name ain't Rocklyn, I'll eat your hat."

Rocklyn looked at him coldly. "It's a good hat," he said curtly. "I'll keep on wearing it."

"Knew your daddy, boy, and you favor him. Sure, you've come over for a hunt, like he used to."

Rocklyn stared at the man, who was middle-aged and almost as wide as he was tall. His surly mood still held him.

The short man grinned. "You've heard of many a Long John," he said. "I'm Short John."

"Short John!" Slowly Rocklyn held out his hand. "Dad talked about you."

Short John said bluntly, "Ain't in a jackpot are you, boy? You stiffened up like a totem pole when I yelled your name."

Rocklyn's sense of fairness compelled him to civility. "No, but I had a little . . . trouble. I'm clearing out."

"Meaning likewise, that you're doing no favors," the short man added shrewdly. "I got none to ask, except it would pleasure me if you'd go on a hunt with me, same as your Dad used to."

Reluctantly Rocklyn smiled. "Sure, I'll go," he said. "I've got plenty of time."

Short John helped him unsaddle and then led the way to a low, rambling log building. "This calls for a celebration," he said briskly. "I'm not one to drink much, but, say, I can eat apple pie."

The kitchen was empty but women's voices sounded near the back door.

"Got a boarder," Short John explained. "We keep a couple of rooms for travelers."

He produced a pie, cut two huge wedges and shoved one of them over. The warm and homely kitchen and Short John's unquestioning friendliness were breaking through Rocklyn's sullenness. Halfway through his cut of pie he blurted out, "You see anything the matter with me?"

Short John looked at him inquiringly.

"Any man can brush with trouble, maybe a few words over a card game or a fist fight when you've had a drink too many, and the next morning it's forgotten," Rocklyn explained thickly. "Not me. I draw trouble like sugar draws flies, an' one thing leads to another till I'm up to my neck in hellfire."

"From what I've heard you handle hellfire pretty good," Short John commented dryly.

"I'm fed up with being dragged into other people's grief," Rocklyn said hotly. "I'm through with it."

The back door opened quickly and two women came in, the older as tall as Short John, with soft grey hair.

The younger was not outstandingly pretty at first glance, but a second look showed beautiful dark eyes and soft curling brown hair. Her clothing had the smartness of city tailoring.

Short John said, "Meet Miss Nancy

Burt, Red. She's visiting us from Denver."

Rocklyn rose. His fingers were busy with a cigarette as he bent his head slightly and added a few polite words.

The girl's eyes lingered on him for a moment and then returned again before she left.

Rocklyn looked down to find Short John grinning. "Any man that draws the women's eyes like you do, an' tops it off with red hair can expect to stay tied up to trouble," he said. "Her Grandpap built Hunter's Inn."

Rocklyn was incredulous. "An inn? Up here?"

"Sure. Old man Burt run it for city hunters that'd pay fancy prices for a good hunt. He done all right for years, but lately there's only been a few regulars coming."

Rocklyn asked, surprised, "This city girl is up here to run an inn for hunters?"

Short John made a wry face. "She's going to try."

OUTSIDE the slow clip-clop of horses and men's brief voices gave notice of new travelers for supper.

Two men came into the kitchen. Rocklyn gave the first only a careless glance, but as the second stood in the glow of the lamp and pulled off coat and gloves he experienced an instinctive reaction that was neither fear nor dislike but alertness.

Short John said, "Howdy, strangers. Got any handles?"

The second man answered, "Chance Gorman," jerking his thumb at himself. "He's Sheep."

Nancy Burt came in. Rocklyn saw how Gorman's eyes went to her, and he thought that she knew it and was not displeased. It stung him a little.

Supper was better than good. Afterward Nancy Burt joined him. She seemed openly curious. "You haven't lived here always, have you?"

Rocklyn replied, "All except for two years in school."

Short John said dryly, "Might as well let me save you some trouble, Miss Nancy. Red could do the job you got in mind, but I don't think he'll take it."

She stuck to her purpose. "I don't see any harm in asking him. I want a man to act as host at Hunter's Inn during the hunting season." She studied his face for a moment and then added frankly, "I'll be in hot water if I can't find him. I sent notices to a number of gun and sport clubs, and I expect guests within a week."

Rocklyn relaxed a little. "Why, Miss Burt, I don't reckon I've a qualification in the world for makin' a bunch of city hunters happy."

Across the room Chance Gorman had turned his dark head and was listening with open interest. He said, "If the job is open, I'd like a chance at it. I'm a pretty good hunter and I can take a hand at almost any game in a deck."

Nancy looked at him thoughtfully. "Well, you see, there's more to it than that." But she did not explain and turned back to Rocklyn. "Don't turn it down until you've looked it over," she urged.

Rocklyn hesitated.

Short John put in, "No bother to that, Red. Our hunt will be there. We can all ride up and give it the once-over."

Some impulse led Rocklyn to say, "Okay then, but you'd better ask Gorman too."

Gorman said blandly, "Sure I'll come. 'Take a chance,' that's me."

HUNTER'S INN lay high in the hills on the shores of the Nakahegan Lake. At the lake's outlet the water was wind-ruffled and milky green, while walls of grey stone rose sheer almost from the edge of the lake.

Short John, who was riding ahead, pointed toward a sweeping rise of ground. "The Inn's up there."

Rocklyn nodded absently. He was still trying to shake off a nagging sense of uneasiness over the absence of Sheep.

Chance Gorman had explained it reasonably enough, "Sheep purely hates cold. He's driftin' South to hole up for warm weather."

Rocklyn, remembering Sheep's stupid face and aimless ways, thought that Sheep was a man who would always follow another. Therefore, if he had gone away

Gorman had sent him. But to what purpose?

Hunter's Inn was built of native grey stone and squared logs. "It ain't fancy," Short John said, "but it's comfortable and can take care of twenty or twenty-five hunters. There's a man an' wife here as caretakers and general help and an ex-lumber-camp cook. They don't come any better this side of heaven."

Nancy slid out of her saddle and said gayly, "Then let's go in and sample." She smiled up at Rocklyn, and went inside.

There was a suppressed exultance about Chance Gorman. "Boy, what a layout," he said. "Perfect."

Rocklyn murmured, watching the man, "Perfect, sure. But for what purpose?"

Gorman turned slowly. To Rocklyn there was significance in that slow, controlled movement—it spelled a man not easily swerved. Gorman smiled faintly. "Why, for hunting. For making love. Listen to the wind sing through the pines."

Rocklyn murmured, still watching him for some betraying sign, "Fine for all that. A fine isolated spot for a hide-out, too."

Gorman gave away nothing. "Sure. Who wouldn't want to hide out with Nancy Burt?"

Rocklyn left Gorman and went inside.

Short John knelt before the big fireplace, feeding pitch pine to a roaring fire. Nancy was singing as she watched him.

Nancy's song broke off short and Short John got up, staring. "You give me a turn, Red, stalking in like that," he complained. He looked at Rocklyn's set face. "What in hell's the matter?"

Rocklyn's sullenness gave way to an aching misery. "I ought to get out," he said desperately. "Everywhere I go, trouble follows like a dog. Like the last time. I took a job as foreman for Sam Longman an' it wasn't two months before I was shooting it out in a boundary dispute. Even had a brush with Two Spot, an' he'd kill a man for the fun of it." He was bitter. "After the trouble was over and Two Spot had lit a shuck out of the country, old Sam paid me off and turned the job over to his nephew."

Short John growled. "You've got the wrong slant, son. Trouble doesn't follow you—people know you can handle it an' bring it to you. It ain't no jinx." he added coolly, "All you got to do to cure it is walk out on the job sometime."

Somehow that added to Rocklyn's misery.

NANCY broke in, "Nothing will happen." Excitement had brought a wave of color to her cheeks. Impulsively she caught Rocklyn's hand. "If there is such a thing as a jinx, I've got one too. Nothing exciting ever happens to me. Never!"

She was eager, glowing, as he had not seen her before. "I'll bargain with you," she said gayly. "I'll bring you some dullness, if you'll bring me some excitement."

There was a hint of change and awakening about her. Rocklyn drew an unsteady breath and knew he could never leave her. He said gravely, "It's a deal."

As they solemnly shook hands on it, Short John remarked, "I hear a horse comin' up."

In another few minutes his Indian handyman brought a couple of telegrams.

Short John exclaimed, "Say, this's fine. From old Cyrus Hitchcock. Says he'll be up in three days with a party of five." His broad face beamed. "I'll be glad to see the old war horse again. The other one is from a stranger name of Jones. He'll be up tomorrow night with a couple of friends."

Nancy said, "I've got to hurry and see about sheets and blankets." She gave Rocklyn a mischievous look as she went out. "See? My jinx is better than yours. Nothing is going to happen except you'll be host to a hundred hunters."

Rocklyn demanded, "John, where was that last telegram sent from?"

"Eagle Pass. This man Jones is already in the up country."

"I reckon," Rocklyn said. "Railroad siding ten or a dozen miles below, isn't there? A man could catch a freight into Eagle Pass, couldn't he?"

Short John was bewildered. "Sure. Why?"

Rocklyn said coldly, "Sheep left before daylight, and it's likely that Gorman sent him. Could he get to Eagle Pass in time to have sent that telegram?"

Short John drew a quick startled breath. "He could, Red. With a little luck he could just do it."

Rocklyn said soberly, "We're going to have some queer guests. Maybe some dangerous ones."

THE INN glistened in the late twilight. Nancy and her helpers had scrubbed and polished all day. She and Gorman and Rocklyn were gathered around the big fireplace, when outside, the Indian's wild yell heralded the arrival of the guests.

Nancy's sheeks were red with excitement. "Supper's just finishing! Everything's ready! This is fun!"

She hurried away. Rocklyn's keen eyes marked a shadow of regret on Gorman's dark face. "It would be a shame if she had a lot of trouble just when things were breaking her way, wouldn't it?" he suggested casually.

The men came in grouped together as though in uncertainty and suspicion, and through the open door Rocklyn saw snowflakes drifting down.

Then one of the men stood forward. Every nerve in Rocklyn's body tightened. His hunch had been good. The hunter, Jones, was the gunman, Two Spot.

The man's restless eyes passed him without recognition and Rocklyn smiled grimly. A man looked different through rifle sights.

The Indian had news. "Bad fight in Eagle Pass. Feller shot up a couple of men in Black Joe's. The word is he just got mad an' started shootin'."

"We'll take care of him if he comes this way," Short John ejaculated. "What'd he look like?"

"Dunno. Stranger. Kind of a thin little guy." The Indian finished, "The other party come early. They'll be in tonight."

Short John yelled, "Hitchcock? The old buzzard."

Rocklyn made some mental rearrangements. With other guests due immediately he could not risk a fight.

Then Two Spot snarled, "How long do we have to stand here?"

Rocklyn conducted his dangerous guests upstairs with a geniality that was deceptive.

AFTERWARD he waited and watched for a chance to witness the meeting between Gorman and Two Spot that he was sure would come.

It came almost at once. Gorman came up the stairs openly and knocked on Two Spot's door.

The door opened a crack and Rocklyn saw the gunman's narrow and suspicious face. Gorman shoved the door open and strode in, kicking it shut behind him.

Rocklyn drifted closer and caught angry phrases. "A grizzly bear with pepper up his snout would ha' showed more sense. . . . Shut up and keep listenin'. . . . If you had to shoot up the town, why come here with a swarm of wasps on your tail. . . . Spoiled the whole set-up. . . . Fry in your own fat, for all I care."

Two Spot sounded conciliatory and even anxious—with good reason, Rocklyn thought grimly.

He drew back a few steps and waited as Gorman came out. Gorman showed no surprise at seeing him, almost as though he expected him.

Rocklyn said coldly, "It was a pretty scheme—to make Hunter's Inn headquarters for a gang of crooks. With only a girl to deal with it would have been easy. But it didn't work out so well, did it?"

Gorman's face was cold and set. He drawled, "Are you trying to persuade me I should get rid of you?"

Rocklyn hesitated. He knew what he wanted, and he thought he knew how he could get it. Downstairs a door opened and Nancy's happy laughter echoed through the hall.

Rocklyn said softly, "I think as a gambler you're pretty much small fry, Chance. You'll take a chance on a little deal with the odds in your favor, sure. But a man-sized gamble would be too big for you."

"I don't stampede that easy, brother," Gorman growled. "Get on with it. Name it."

Rocklyn set his hands on his hips. "You made your brag that you were a good hunter. So am I. With new snow the tracking will be good in the morning. We'll each take a rifle and one shell. The man that gets the first deer wins."

Gorman waited.

Rocklyn went on slowly, "If you lose you get Two Spot and his pals out of here."

Gorman started and flicked a glance at him. "An' if I win?"

Rocklyn smiled thinly. "Miss Nancy Burt goes on thinking you're a pretty good feller."

A dull red was surging into Gorman's cheeks. "Damn you, Red Rocklyn," he said thickly. "You're on. I'll take it. An' you'll pay for that crack."

He stalked off. Rocklyn moved noiselessly back into the shodows and watched Two Spot's door. Presently it moved a fraction. There was nothing more.

Rocklyn went downstairs, and Short John met him in the hall. Rocklyn told the older man of the hunt in the morning.

Short John swore anxiously. "Red, you fool, you're takin' a thin chance. You watch your step come morning. That's the way the Indians settled their grudge fights. One arrow each. But they didn't hunt deer. They hunted each other."

IN THE MORNING the sun was bright and the wind still. Short John, carrying three rifles, looked up at the towering heights beyond them, where the sky showed an incredible blue against the black and white of the mountain.

"Deep snow up there," he observed with satisfaction. "That'll drive the deer down. An' three inches of new snow to make good tracking. Boys, you couldn't find better hunting."

He examined two of the rifles carefully and then loaded them, one shell in each. "This bench is six or eight miles long," he said. "An' it's one of the best spots for deer on the Nakahegan Lake. Your luck ought to be as good to the left as to the right. Toss a coin and pick up a rifle an' your direction."

Rocklyn flipped a coin in the air. Gorman won. "Left," he said quietly, and took one of the rifles. There was a tight line around his mouth as he turned.

"I figure I can hear a rifle shot for miles this mornin'," Short John said. "I'll wait here and keep track of which one sounds first."

Rocklyn nodded, took the other rifle and swung off to the right.

The new snow was slippery and in several places he needed his hobnailed boots to keep his footing. Around a thicket of young spruce, crisscrossed with downfalls, he picked up the small, sharp prints of deer.

Ahead perhaps a mile, the wide bench narrowed and the deer trail took that direction. He followed but before he had gone far he heard the shot behind him.

It rang out and echoed, strange and spiteful. Rocklyn listened and then went doggedly on. It all depended now on whether or not Gorman had missed.

He was alert and wary, feeling more of the instincts of the hunted than the hunter. As he came to the narrowest part of the bench, where the steep slope rose sharply on one hand and dropped away on the other, four deer broke from cover.

Rocklyn's quick shot was instinctive. The buck leaped high and dropped. Another shot echoed his. The bullet snarled past his ear and Rocklyn hit the ground, savage and bitter.

GORMAN had sneaked along a handful of extra shells and was hunting him. He cursed himself and Gorman in harsh anger.

Then his breath stopped as he thought he heard Nancy's voice, calling his name. In another moment he was sure. She was on the slope above him, calling, "Red, where are you?"

He yelled frantically, "Go back. Nancy, get out of here."

Instead she cried, "Catch me," and started sliding down the slope toward him.

A tiny avalanche poured past him and Rocklyn heard a startled yelp from below. He sprang up and caught Nancy, disregarding a bullet that spanged off a rock above him. They both tumbled flat.

Rocklyn cried desperately, "Girl, are you crazy? Gorman's out for a kill."

The girl's clothes were covered with snow and she was gasping for breath, but her dark eyes were bright and fearless. "Not Gorman," she panted. "The other man, Jones. He shot Gorman. I followed him when I saw him sneak out. I screamed, tried to warn Chance, but I was too late. Then he came this way. Short John tried to head him off and I hurried to warn you. He must have slipped by John."

Rocklyn pulled himself together. "Kill crazy," he said. "And suspicious as a cornered coyote." He eyed the mass of loose snow at the edge of the bench. "Your slide gave me an idea," he said. "If we could start enough of a snow slide to hold him from shooting until I get down to him. . . ."

It was like a fantastic nightmare, Rocklyn thought wildly. Rolling snowballs with a girl while hugging the ground to keep from being shot.

He shoved the big balls down the slope and before he could stop her, Nancy was looking down. "He's halfway up the slope," she reported excitedly. "And a big gob of snow hit him and he can't stand up."

Yelling like a wild man Rocklyn launched himself down the slope. The gunman was struggling to get solid footing on the slippery rocks. Rocklyn catapulted into him, feet first. One wild shot went off harmlessly, then the rifle flew out of Two Spot's hand and both men went sliding and rolling down the slope.

Rocklyn brought up against a big boulder with a jarring thump and struggled up.

Two Spot was sprawled not far from him. Rocklyn cuffed him into cringing submission. "The little man who hid behind a big gun," he jeered.

Short John shouted at him from one side, and Nancy came slipping down to him.

"I'll take care of this bird," Short John said. "Red, you hustle across and see about Gorman."

Nancy faltered, "I saw him fall."

But Short John shook his head. "That breed's hard to kill."

"Then I'm coming too," Nancy cried.

Half-running, she managed to keep up with Rocklyn's long stride. "Over there, toward that big pine," she panted.

Then they both cried out. Gorman was standing by the big tree, holding on to it. He was haggard and the side of his shirt was blood-soaked, but he managed a faint, wry grin. "Hell of a note. First time I ever had to run out on a gambling debt. Or did you miss your buck, too?"

Rocklyn shook his head.

Nancy smiled radiantly at Gorman. "I saw you," she said. "You fired in the air just as that gunman shot you. The two shots sounded as one. Short John told me all about it. You meant to lose, and I think you're grand."

For a brief, shame-faced second the men's eyes met. Then Gorman muttered hurriedly, "Don't cut out no halo for me, sister. You'd be takin' a long chance on it fitting."

Rocklyn stooped so he could ease Gorman across his shoulders. "Maybe not such a long chance," he said. "Catch hold. I can pack you downhill to our horses."

Hunter's Inn was quiet and peaceful. Short John and his Indian handyman had taken Two Spot and his companions to Eagle Pass. Chance Gorman slept quietly.

There was no one beside the big fireplace but Nancy when Rocklyn came in.

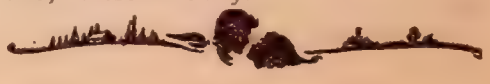
He smiled at her wistfully. "My jinx is still with me," he observed. "I'd better clear out. You won't have any more trouble."

Unexpectedly Nancy said gayly, "That's just what I'm afraid of. This was the first time in my life that something exciting happened and I like it. I'm afraid if you go everything will be dull again."

Rocklyn shook off his daze. "I'd be right glad to stick around for good," he said earnestly, reaching out eager arms, "if you feel like riskin' it."

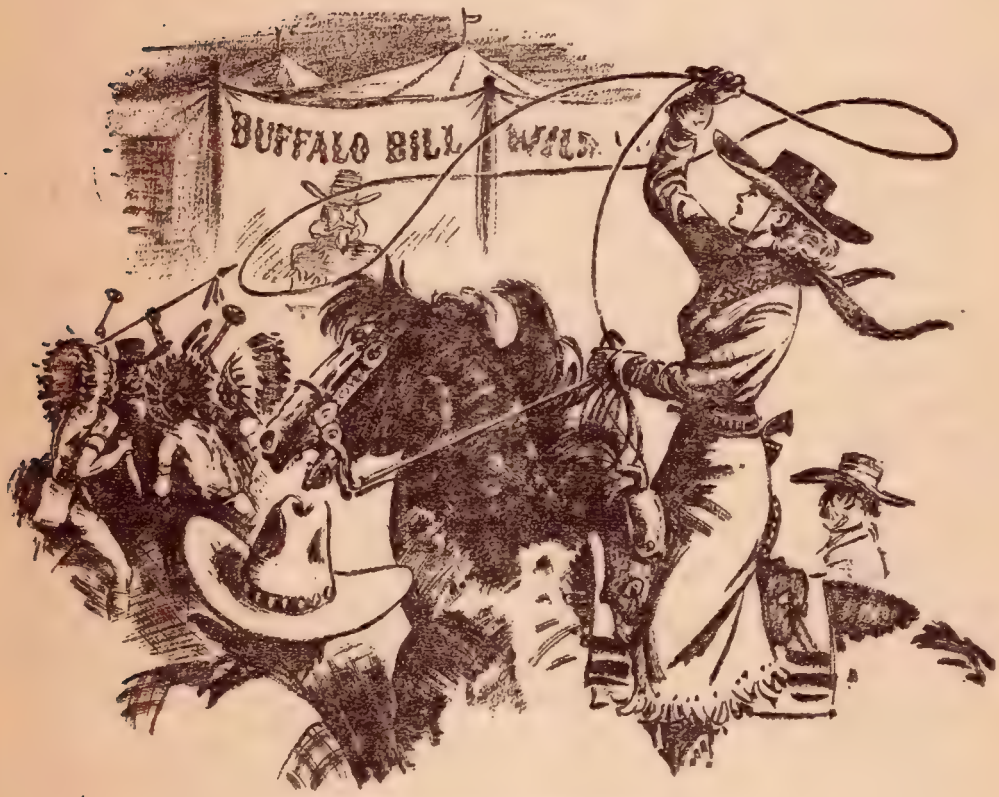
Nancy snuggled her head into his shoulder. "Don't you see? The things that are hard for one are just fun for two. Where's the risk?"

Rocklyn kissed her, thrilling to the velvet touch of her lips. "Putting it that way," he said, "there ain't any."



Top-Hand With a Rope

By Ben T. Young



A swishing loop dropped over all five

THAT Sunday morning in North Platte was hot enough to pop corn. Even in the high-ceilinged dining-room of the Natrona Hotel it was stifling. Pausing in her work of helping set the tables for the noon meal, Rose Denio stepped to an open window for a breath of air.

Opposite, across the dusty alley, was the blank side wall of the Pronghorn Saloon, and on the wall was a faded circus poster. Dully, Rose gazed at it, the oversized head-and-shoulders portrait of white-haired Bill Cody surrounded by a flamboyant red-and-yellow lettering announcing the coming of *Buffalo Bill's Wild West and Congress of Rough Riders of the World—Here Soon!*

ROSE couldn't take the cooking trail to a man's heart. All she could do was ride and rope

But Rose, acutely miserable, wasn't interested. She felt that a few more days of waiting table, a few more nights of fitful sleep in the stuffy, crowded room shared with other female help, would drive her loco. And she seemed to have no out.

"I'll have to find a way," she told herself grimly, turning back to distribute more napkins while a whistle on a Union Pacific engine announced the arrival of what was probably the first section of the circus train in Cody's adopted home town. "I've got to!" But how? Being young, she could probably marry, if she could manage to look less sad. But she'd not marry without love; and none of the young cowhands and railroaders thereabouts seemed to interest her. The tinhorn gamblers and other riffraff she couldn't tolerate.

At twelve sharp the dining-room opened, and the first customers to enter were four strangers who seated themselves at one of her tables. "Howdy, ma'am," the youngest said, and something about his soft, deep voice made her give him a second look. The others were already studying their menus, but the slim jigger's grey eyes were fixed on hers.

"Hello," she said, noting his crisp black hair and cowboy garb.

Then the stolid, thick-set hombre began sounding off his order; and as the other tables were filling up too, she kept her mind on her work. In and out of the steamy kitchen she hurried, bearing heavy trays of food and stacked empty dishes, wincing when the cranky head waitress spoke sharply to her; hating the clatter, the heat, the need for haste.

Now and again she found time for a fleeting glance at the young cowboy. Always she caught him looking at her and liked the way he flushed with embarrassment. Who is he, she wondered. He had the earmarks of a man used to horses, yet his clothes were not workworn and his lean strong hands looked soft. When he'd gone she found no tip beside his empty pie plate and was glad. But she'd probably never see him again.

When the dining-room was finally empty and cleaned up, she was through till supper time and went to her quarters. Bathing herself as best she could with the meager facilities available, she dragged a canvas roll from beneath her cot. Save for the cheap print dress hanging on the wall, that roll contained all the clothes she owned—a battered Stetson, a divided skirt of fringed brown buckskin, two cotton shirts and a pair of high-heeled boots. Too, there was a Colt revolver. Those, a saddle and bridle, and Chief—her dun pony now on pasture at the edge of town—were all that was left for her when the kindly but duty-bound sheriff had sold off the two-bit Diamond D after her pa had followed her ma across the Great Divide.

"Jumpin' Judas, you goin' ridin' in this heat?" another fagged waitress called Opal demanded as Rose stepped into the divided skirt. "You should ought to latch onto that circus and git paid fer forkin' a horse, if you like ridin' so much."

Rose stared at the blowsy creature sprawled half-clothed on the adjacent rumpled cot. "Do they have women performers?"

Ruefully regarding her swollen bare feet, Opal nodded. "Jest as sure as Grover Cleveland is president. You should ought to have built up to them coots at one o' your tables. They was circus folks, and jest lookin' at that handsome young one gave me the buckthumps. Their train was late gettin' in from Omaha, and like as not them as could afford it come here to eat rather'n wait fer the circus grub."

Silently Rose finished dressing and tidied her yellow hair before the cracked mirror. I knew he wasn't a working cowhand, she told herself. Just an actor I'll never see again. He's nice, though. Gave me the buckthumps too.

"Whyn't ride out to the show lot and hunt that feller up?" Opal asked drowsily. "He could make you acquainted with the boss-man who'd maybe take you on. Even troupin' wtih a tent show would beat this here, and with your looks you could easy snag one o' them handsome soldiers I seen on the posters. Go on!"

"I couldn't," Rose sighed, dropping a small parcel of sugar into her shirt pocket,

and grasping the cracked china doorknob. "Guess I was raised wrong for making my own way, but I simply couldn't tag after a man."

SHE stepped out then, and stopped as though she'd run into a fence. Right before her, in the shade of a dusty cottonwood, the circus jigger sat on his heels smoking a cigarette and watching the door expectantly.

"Howdy, Miss Denio, ma'am," he grinned sheepishly, rising, shucking the cigarette and hauling off his hat in a single motion. "I'm Jim McKean of the circus band, but don't get the notion I'm just another coyote on the prowl. All during dinner I watched you, and wondered how come you looked so humpbacked with trouble. I hung around to see if I couldn't somehow iron things out."

Knowing that the sound of a man's voice had brought her roommates to the open back window, Rose flushed. "I'm bound for the pasture to see my pony," she said shakily, hoping no one could hear her heart thumping like a Sioux wardrum. "Maybe you'll go with me."

Flustered as a kid with his first date, he stepped all over himself following her up the alley to the street. "So you're a musician," she said when they'd reached the plank walk.

"Sort of," he agreed, siding her along. "But only temporary. My dad was foreman on the 02 Bar over in Wyomin', and my ma was the ranch cook. I was fetched up in the saddle and want a spread o' my own, but pilin' up *dinero* fer fencin' and buildings is slow goin' on a cowpoke's pay. Havin' picked up the knowhow of a slip-horn, I took on with Bill Cody's band. The pay is good, and I'm a-savin' it. Winters I go back and work on the homestead I'm shapin' up along Powder River. Buildin' up a little jag o' cows there, too. But I come to talk about you. What's frettin' you?"

Without a trace of self-pity she told him. "I'm up against a knot," she said. "Ma's been gone for years, and Pa (he died last winter) raised me as though I'd been a boy. I can ride and rope and shoot, but ranchers can't use a woman cowhand, so I'm forced to take a woman's job. I hate being indoors. And I'm lonely. The girls I work with are good-hearted but rough formations. The men I meet either pay a waitress no heed, or have the wrong ideas. That little ol' pony yonder is my only friend."

That little old pony wasn't yonder very long. With a nicker he started on a high lope from the riverside shade in which he'd been switching flies. At the fence he got his sugar, then nosed the pocket of Jim's shirt in hopes of more.

"Pretty a buckskin as I ever saw," Jim chuckled, stroking the sleek neck. "Showy."

"Best roping horse in all Nebraska, too," Rose declared proudly, ducking between the wires to unsnarl a witch-knot in the black forelock. "I trained him, and we work together like a knife and fork. Now that we have no calves to rope we amuse ourselves by practicing all sorts of fancy stuff like the *mangana de cabra,* that figure eight which ties onto both a critter's neck and forelegs. An old Mexican taught me when we still had the ranch."

Thoughtfully chewing a blade of grass, Jim said nothing, just stared across the prairie to where the canvasmen were leisurely erecting the white cloth fence which Buffalo Bill, having no aerial performers, used in lieu of a big top.

FINALLY Rose gathered her nerve. "Mr. McKean," she said hesitantly, "I hate to ask a favor on such short acquaintance, but would you introduce me to Mr. Cody, or whoever hires the performers? I'd like to talk myself into a job."

Jim shook his head. "No life for a woman. We've got some, of course, like the trick rider and the one who's a top-hand with sixgun and rifle. But they're old troupers well able to take care of themselves. Besides, they got husbands. Now a soft pretty little filly like you would right off be in trouble. Like most circuses, Cody's is a rough outfit. We've got warwhoops, Cossacks, Mexicans, ex-soldiers from all the European armies, and just plain tough Americans. You'd be like a sagehen at a mass-meetin' of coyotes."

"I'm no slouch with a sixgun myself, should it come to that," Rose persisted. "And the jaspers you mention couldn't be any tougher than some around here. I've got to get out, and if you won't take me to Mr. Cody I'll go by myself."

Looking troubled as a bullfrog waiting for rain, Jim followed her through the fence. "Look, ma'am," he said, "to help you out I'd start across Death Valley with no water, but dogged if I'll help you get a job with that circus. I will, though, be glad to stake you to train fare to anywhere you've got folks; or think you can get a good job, like store-clerkin' in Denver maybe, or teachin' school."

Rose made a quick dab at an eye from which a tear had started. "You're nice, Jim," she said with a catch in her voice. "But those are inside jobs too. And I couldn't accept your money, even as a loan. We scarcely know each other."

"We'll know each other better before I'm through," Jim vowed.

"Maybe so, maybe not," Rose sighed with a shrug. "You'll move along with the show; and if I stay here, or start drifting like a tumbleweed. . . ." She let it hang there, and looked up into his worried eyes.

"Dogged if you couldn't talk a giraffe into buyin' stilts," he chuckled suddenly. "I'll try to make medicine with Cody so he'll at least give you a tryout, and I'll see to it you're not pestered."

Rose wagged her head. "Should I get the job you're not to feel obliged to ride close herd on me. Let's go see Mr. Cody now."

With a sigh of near exasperation, Jim took her arm and moved her toward the shade by the river. "Cody is out at his ranch servin' scamper-juice to his friends, so come sit down. We'll see him directly after the parade tomorrow."

Much to Chief's disgust (he soon wandered off to nibble grass) they sat and sat and talked and talked. Jim explained that Cody was a perfectionist. An act had to be really good or he'd have none of it. And there was, of course, a possibility Rose might fail to click. "So don't quit your hotel job till you're sure," he warned.

Suddenly alert he listened, then rose to peer toward the show grounds. A bugle was chattering. Jim looked at his watch. "That's first call for supper, a quarter of six. What time you due back to work?"

Hat in hand, Rose was already hurrying toward the fence. "I'm late now," she called over her shoulder.

Frightened and breathless, she arrived in the filled dining-room to find her job gone like the buffalo. "You're out, Denio," the head waitress declared flatly. "You're too toplofty for this work anyhow, so turn in your uniform and pull foot pronto."

Tight-lipped but managing to keep her chin up, Rose started back through the kitchen. Opal, loading a tray, caught her arm. "Don't fret none, honey," Opal muttered. "I'll fetch you some supper; and tonight, when the old catawampus has went, you come back and sleep here. Meantime, if that show feller comes around I'll tell him—"

"No, Opal, please!" Rose protested. "Don't tell him anything. else he'll feel obliged to help. Let me work this out alone. You've been nice, and I'm grateful. Good-by and good luck."

QUICKLY changing back to her riding garb, she made up her bundle, dragged her saddle outside, and stood in the failing light. Having been paid the previous night she had cash in her money-belt, but rather than buy supper and rent a room for the night, she chose to save it against more hard luck. Anyway, she wasn't hungry; and a night under the stars was preferable any time to the stuffy hole she'd just quit.

Grasping the horn, she swung the saddle over her right shoulder, got the slim canvas roll under her left arm and started off. To avoid the street she went down the alley to where it gave onto the open. Lest she arouse someone's curiosity and be followed or told about, she kept going till she'd gained the shelter of the river willows.

My luck is raveling out, she told herself ruefully, sitting down on the roll. Now I'll have to get that circus job or be homeless as a poker chip.

Finally night moved in, and she went on to the tree-sheltered spot where she and Jim had spent the afternoon. Removing only her boots and hat, she bedded down with the saddle and blanket for a pillow, the canvas wrapped about her, the loaded Colt handy.

From the town came occasional yells and a shot or two, as the local toughs and circus boys got crosswise of each other. Rose wasn't afraid, much. However, emotional turmoil made her wakeful, and she lay listening to the soft night sounds about her, and thinking. She was out of practice with her rope, and if she did get a tryout she'd be nervous as an alley cat. But she had to tie onto that job.

At last she slid into fitful sleep, grasping the Colt now and then as some noise roused her. But finally morning came, a grey-green light sifting in among the trees, and she rose. Today she wanted to look her best, but the odds were against her. She bathed in the shallow, murky river, shook the wrinkles out of skirt and fresh shirt, and did the best she could with her hair without a mirror.

Now the sun was rising, and turning toward the show ground, she saw a man walking away from her toward it. The light played on a gun-butt at his hip, and he moved with the weariness of one who has not slept. It was Jim. Probably he'd talked with Opal, guessed where Rose would spend the night, and had stationed himself to ward off intruders. "He's nice. He really is," she said softly, gazing after him.

SHE ate a frugal breakfast at the Silver Dollar Café, then rested at her bivouac till mid-morning. When the parade headed into the main drag, where everybody and the dogs were waiting, she was there on Chief to see it. Led by handsome old Bill Cody on a white charger, it was a sight to pop the eyeballs, a prancing rolling stream of color and stirring sounds—the Cowboy Band and Jim with his shining slide trombone, painted Sioux on painted ponies, the creaking Deadwood coach from which pretty ladies smiled, and a sheeted Conestoga wagon drawn by oxen.

There was a detachment of Uncle Sam's Cavalry, and gunners erect on their rumbling caisson. There were Royal Irish lancers, French dragoons, German cuirassiers, and swarthy, bearded men in belted smocks and astrakhan caps whom Rose presumed were Cossacks.

And there were Mexican vaqueros in the fancy trappings of their kind, and just plain American cowboys. Flags and guidons, feathers and manes and tails fluttered. Brass and silver and polished leather glinted in the sunlight. Golden dust rose in clouds, stirred by dancing hoofs and rolling iron tires.

Chief was stirred too and arched his neck and pawed the earth and nickered. "Just don't bust your cinch, friend," Rose chuckled as she turned him toward the show ground. "Help me do my stuff now, and we'll belong to that outfit."

While awaiting the parade's return she loitered near the cluster of tents and tepees beside the enclosed area. Taking the maguey rope from her saddle, she made a few practice casts. Then, after inspecting the honda, she re-coiled the rope and sat nervously slapping her boot with it. There was smoke and hurry about the big cook-tent. She hoped there'd be time to see Cody before dinner, for shortly afterward the performance would begin, and when that ended every one would be busy making ready for departure. Cody then carried no lighting facilities for evening shows.

Shortly the returning procession appeared, and with heart hitting her back teeth Rose edged closer to where it would disband. She saw Cody dismount and disappear into a wall tent. She saw Jim turn his white gelding over to a fellow bandsman, and with trombone under his arm head toward Cody's tent. But he was blocked by an hombre in frock coat and black Stetson. They argued; and finally giving up, Jim turned and stood looking about uncertainly.

Apprehension hit Rose like an icy blast. Half-heartedly she raised her arm, caught Jim's attention, and he shambled toward her. "No dice," he sighed, his face long as a wagon track. "Brandt, the manager, won't

even let me see Cody. Says we've got enough acts, and—"

Because a bull-size ruckus had broken out nearby, Jim stopped. Five Sioux bucks, naked save for breech-clouts and still carrying the lances, war clubs and tomahawks they'd borne in the parade, were haranguing a white man who was talking right back in their own tongue.

"Cante sica!" the biggest buck snarled, shaking his lance as they all crowded closer to the white man.

"Yankapo!" the white man ordered in a voice cold as an iron wedge, and a Colt appeared in his paw.

All hands and the cooks had noticed hell bulging out of its shuck and came running, but before any of them arrived a squaw screamed something which seemed to urge on the bucks.

ONE swung his arm to throw his war club, but abrupt as a thunderclap a swishing loop built to fit dropped over all five. Rose took a quick dally around her saddle-horn and spurred Chief, who left out for Scott's Bluff on a dead run. He leaped a mess of prickly pear, but the bundle of Indians bounced right through it with howls that would have shamed a wolf pack.

As Rose tugged Chief to a halt, the crowd closed in about the skinned-up bucks; and still clutching his precious horn, Jim overtook her. So did Bill Cody, coatless, his long hair flying. "Ma'am," Cody panted, "who in hell are you?"

"Now listen, Colonel," Jim cut in, stepping forward and yelling to be heard above the noise the crowd was making. "Just keep your voice down and remember your manners. This girl—"

"I'm Rose Denio," Rose interrupted as she re-coiled the rope which had been freed at the far end. "I came to get a job doing plain and fancy roping in your show, but—"

"But what?" Cody demanded.

"Brandt says you don't need any more acts," Jim said.

"The hell you preach!" Cody exploded, rearing back like a bogged mule. "I'm the dog with the big brass collar around this outfit. I saw how this young lady staved off a wholesale die-up. She's quick under the hat and a good roper. I'll take her on."

"But maybe you'd best see if I'm really good enough," Rose cautioned. "I'd hate to start, then be—"

"I'll take a chance," Cody declared. "And even if you couldn't throw a loop down a well I'd want you around. You're ornamental if nothing else. Now join me for dinner in the mess tent. You, too, McKean. We'll make arrangements."

As Cody stalked off, Jim grasped the reins and led Chief to the nearest picket line. He helped Rose dismount, and screened by dust-clouds and eating animals, held her close despite the damned horn in his hand.

"Rose," he said huskily, "without aimin' to, you roped me before you dabbed a loop on those Injuns. What I mean to say is, would you—"

A mule's squeal stopped him, but Rose snuggled closer. "Yes, Jim," she murmured softly and happily, "yes, Jim, I sure would!"

KNOW YOUR WEST

Answers to the questions on page 36

1. The Santa Fe Trail.

2. In cowboy slang, to gimlet a horse means to give him a sore back.

3. Texas.

4. California.

5. Faro or bucking the tiger, keno, poker, monte, stud, roulette, etc.

6. Front foot 5 toes, hind foot 4.

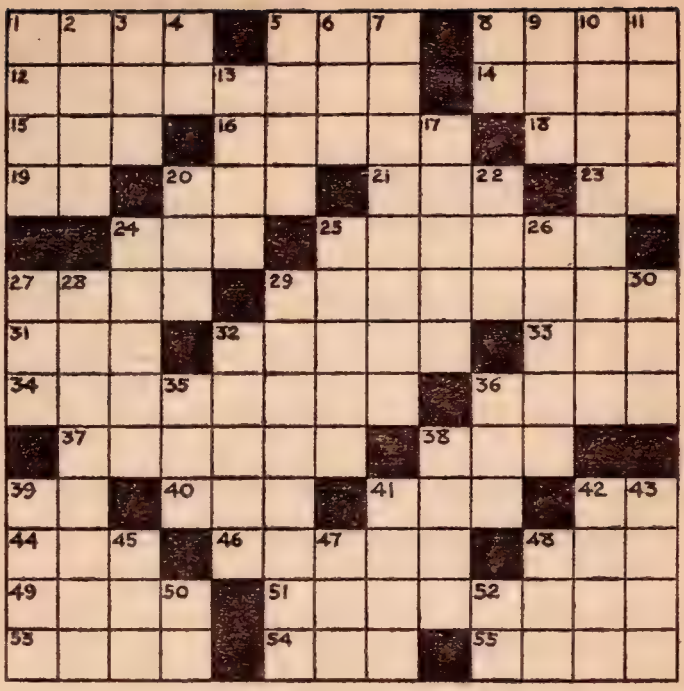
7. Famous hunter, pioneer scout and hero of the Texas Alamo, Davy Crockett.

8. Gut-hooks, gut-robber, gut-shot, gut-shrunk, gut-twister, gut-warmer, cut the big gut, all gurgle and no gut, etc.

9. Utah.

10. To say a man or horse was gypped meant that he had been made ill by drinking gyp or alkali water—from the word gypsum.

THE WESTERNERS' CROSSWORD PUZZLE



The solution to this puzzle will appear in the next issue

ACROSS

1. Western plant
5. To stitch
8. Pain
12. Horse herder
14. Food fish
15. Sprite
16. Light purple
18. High card
19. Belonging to me
20. To place
21. Morose
23. At home
24. Garden tool
25. Long step
27. Old-fashioned exclamation
29. Golden horse
31. Fuel
32. To revolt
33. To sum up
34. Cowboy who rides beyond the boundaries
36. Small nail
37. More tidy
38. Cattle fodder
39. Near
40. Affirmative
41. Female bird
42. In the direction of
44. Sort
46. Western product
48. Large snake
49. Profound
51. Haughty
53. Volcano in Sicily
54. Boy
55. Short poems

DOWN

1. To propel oneself in water
2. Troops
3. Opening
4. Printer's measure
5. Long cut
6. Lamprey
7. Bulldogger
8. Like
9. Rolled tea
10. Southwestern ranch
11. Paradise
13. Mirth
17. Song
20. Turf
22. Faint
24. Speed
25. Cavalry sword
26. Daily record
27. Self
28. Long, heavy glove
29. Base of a pillar
30. Not even
32. Ceremonies
35. Beam
36. To prohibit
38. Male star
39. Military officer
41. Group of cattle
42. Shade of color
43. Cereal plant
45. Knowledge
47. Epoch
48. Naughty
50. Father
52. To depart

Solution to First June Puzzle

The Hills of Midas

By MYRTLE JULIETTE COREY and AUSTIN CORCORAN

THE STORY SO FAR:

Ever since the arrival of ERK STREETER and his girl friend, LAVITA MEARS, the shadow of violence has hung over the holiday air of the town of Midas. To the townfolks Streeter seems to be just a stranger, taking advantage of the summer visitors by running an old-time gambling saloon which he has rented from the hotel-keeper, PHIL ROYCE.

It is rancher PERRY NORTON who is more obviously involved in all the sinister events.

First he rescues ORA FORTUNE, a pretty young opera singer, when she's attacked on the street. The next morning he finds the dead body of Overton, a mining engineer, in his car, and that evening he saves the life of an old prospector, BILL DUFFY, who has been slugged and is in danger of burning to death in his cabin.

Perry had gone to see Duffy to inquire about the ownership of the Katydid mine, which Overton, working for a mining syndicate, had reopened. When Duffy recovers, he tells Perry that the mine was discovered by Cap Judas, on a stake from Mathias Talbot, Perry's dead foster father. Cap Judas, when he died, left the mine to Virginia Talbot, Mathias' daughter, who ran away with a gambler and died before her father saw her again.

It seems to Perry that he, being Mathias Talbot's heir, is therefore now the owner of the Katydid. Then one day in town, he finds Bill Duffy sitting in his car with his eyes closed and a startled expression on his face.

"Who is that girl over by the post office?" he asks. "I'd swear she was Virginia Talbot's daughter."

Perry looks and his heart sinks. The girl is Lavita Mears!

PART THREE

WHEN Perry Norton waked on the morning following the inquest, he wondered why he had been so disturbed by Duffy's insistence that Lavita Mears was Viriginia Talbot's daughter. Perry did believe that Virginia might have had a child, but he didn't think there was a chance in a thousand that Lavita was she.

Bill Duffy was old, and he had recently had a severe shock. Perry's talk with him about Virginia had set his thoughts in that groove. He had been keyed up with excitement, and a little imagination had done the rest.

But there was a possibility which must be considered. If Cap Judah's will had been worded, as the letter implied, "To Virginia Talbot or her heir," the child would have precedence over Virginia's father. Therefore the Katydid mining claim would not be included in the estate Talbot had left to Perry. He would settle that question without delay by a talk with the Denver attorney who had drawn up Cap Judah's will.

Perry telephoned and was given an appointment at eleven o'clock that morning. That allowed time for a stop in Midas.

Coming on the run, carrying picks and shovels, men from all over town were piling into Howard's truck

There was less tension in the atmosphere than on the previous day, but Perry sensed that people he passed were unusually interested in him. Gopher Jake was posed on the hotel corner talking with Ora Fortune and keeping an eye on a tourist car in front of the café. When Perry came along, he greeted him eagerly.

"The Big Six made you an offer yet?" he asked, hardly waiting for good-mornings to be exchanged.

"It hasn't been proved yet that I've got anything they want," Perry replied.

"Everybody knows they've got to buy the Katydid, if the January's going to do 'em any good," Gopher said. "Don't be so secretive, boy."

"Don't *you* be so nosy," Perry retorted, grinning. "I don't even know where the Katydid is, let alone if I own it."

"You know the old Rob Roy mine? Well, go right on past it till you come to a dim track leading off to your left. When you pass a stunted tree you'll see the Katydid opening in the side hill. There's part of the old tipple left. The January's just beyond." Gopher shook his head disgustedly. "Great day, boy!" he exclaimed. "What ails you? If I owned a hole in the ground that was worth from twenty-five to fifty thousand dollars, I'd go and take a good look at it. Wouldn't you?" he asked Ora, who was listening with sparkling eyes.

"Would I! These mines fascinate me. I eat up Gopher's stories of the old days. It's

like living in a stage set here in Midas. When I come out from rehearsal I feel as if I were going right into another opera plot."

"I'll run up and take a look at the Katydid, since it's that close, when I get back from Denver," Perry said. "Want to come along?"

"I'd love to," Ora replied, "but I'm afraid I can't get out of understudy rehearsal."

"I'll drop into the Bonanza around two, on the chance you can make it," Perry said.

Attorney Pitman confirmed Perry's conclusion regarding the heritage of the Katydid. He was more than skeptical about the existence of a child of Virginia Talbot. "Two months elapsed between her letter to her father and the one sent by this doctor to announce the death of Virginia and her husband. The child, if there was one, could have died during that interval."

"I want you to do what you can to clear this up," Perry told him. "And fast."

"Can do," Pitman replied. "I happen to have a friend staying in Chihuahua now. I'll wire him at once and give you a ring at the ranch as soon as I get anything."

THE CLOCK hands were pushing two when Perry re-entered the Bonanza lobby. The proprietor was at the desk.

"Howdy, Norton," he said in his pleasant, professional tones. "I have a message for you." His smile matched his voice but did not hide the look of strain in his eyes.

Unfolding the sheet of paper, Perry read hastily pencilled lines.

Perry:
Terribly sorry Orville won't let me duck rehearsal. If it's over when you get back, come and tell me about the Katydid. Maybe you will take me to see it some other time. Yes? Ora

The letters were perfectly formed and regular but the lines of script curved up at the ends. The writing suggested Ora's personality—frank and direct, yet gay, with a lilt in her nature like that in her voice.

"If Miss Fortune comes in," he told Royce, "tell her I'll be back." He went to his car and drove out of town.

Passing the Rob Roy Mine, Perry located the dim track on his left without difficulty. Tire marks, probably Overton's, showed it had recently been traveled. Perry followed them to a level, gravelly spot beside the remains of the old tipple, where he got out of the car to walk over to the tunnel entrance.

Outside this was a jumble of refuse from the days when Cap Judah had operated the mine, a couple of ore cars lying on their sides, the wheels long motionless and frosted with rust.

Pausing before the timbered opening, Perry stared back into a darkness blacker than any he could have imagined. Not far in from the hill's face all light stopped. The gentle stirring of air against his cheeks had a balmy feel, but he sensed he had only to step a few feet forward to catch the tunnel's sluggish breath, icy and oppressive. He felt both eager and reluctant to go inside.

Hesitating a moment, he went back to the car and got his flashlight. He'd never been this close to a mine tunnel. He meant to take at least a look inside.

He advanced slowly, noting that the opening was solidly timbered for some feet inward. When he had taken a few steps, swinging the light beam ahead of him, a small, bright-flecked piece of rock in the wall caught his eye. Smiling he took out his pocket knife and used the big blade to loosen the glittering fragment. Ora would like that.

He had just dropped the rock into his pocket when he seemed to be surrounded by sound, a heavy booming that slammed against his ear drums. Through it was a crash and rending of rock and wood. Dust filled his nostrils and particles scored his face as he was pressed to the ground, the flashlight knocked from his hand.

He lay for a moment too dazed to think. His first confused reactions were that the old tunnel had collapsed. Bits he had heard about mine cave-ins shuttled about in his mind. There'd been one; another was liable to follow any instant. And he was in pitch darkness.

A piece of timber lay heavily across his hips. He couldn't push it off and when he tried to wriggle from under, it pressed more heavily. A jab of apprehension sent him to groping over the tunnel floor around him. He found rock bits of varied sizes and a litter of rubble, finally touching with his fingertips a smooth, rounded object he knew to be the end of the flashlight. It lay just beyond his grasp. By easing over more on his face and digging his hands into the ground, he found he could drag himself far enough in that direction to get hold of the bulb end of the flash.

IT WAS a bad few seconds before Perry had it firmly in his hand, thumb on the button. He held his breath as he pressed this, exhaling in a gasp when a radiant beam slashed through the blackness.

He was facing towards the inner end of the tunnel where he could see chunks of rock and splintered pieces of the big timbers. Turning the beam upward, he almost blacked out with shock of what he saw. Above him was a network of broken beams insecurely supporting what might be tons of rock and dirt. If he had lifted his head or his hands, he'd have felt the mass so precariously supported above him. He had to get out from under there, and quick.

In a flash of panic he shoved at the timber and gave his hips a tremendous wrench. He was free.

But a grinding above him, the falling of dirt particles and an ominous cracking warned that he'd started something serious. The lattice over his head heaved and settled lower. Simultaneously a cascade of rocks, dirt and broken timber slid to the floor between him and the open stretch of tunnel. Half-sitting, half-crouching, he was as completely caged as if he had been surrounded by iron bars.

Perspiration streamed from every pore, drenching him. He didn't dare make further effort. The least move might bring the slide pouring into his cage. He had an idea the flashlight wouldn't burn much longer, and he thought when that went out he might as well give up.

Turning cautiously, he faced in the direction of the mine opening. That end of the tunnel seemed to be almost solidly blocked. But near one side, he imagined he saw a thread of light. Extinguishing the flashlight, he was sure. Through the rubble of the cave-in a narrow aperture extended to the tunnel entrance, like a pipeline into the open. Moving his face in line with it, Perry felt a light breath of fresh air. Now, he thought, he might manage to hold out until he was rescued. But there would be a good spell of waiting before that happened.

He wondered how long his cage would remain intact? It seemed certain he wouldn't now be able to break through the barrier of rubble walling him from the inner end of the tunnel, though he meant to try, moving with the utmost caution.

As if mocking him, a beam cracked and down came another mixture of rock and dirt, thickening the barrier impassably.

WHEN Ora Fortune came down the street after the understudy rehearsal, she glanced about for Perry's car. The tan sedan wasn't in sight. But the shadow of disappointment lifted from her face when she entered the Bonanza lobby and was given Perry's message.

Humming under her breath, she ran upstairs to give the shining hair a quick brushing and put on a fresh dress that enhanced the blue of her eyes. Then she hurried back to the lobby to a chair from which she could watch the doorway for Perry's return.

Almost an hour passed, and Ora was stirring restlessly when a big-hatted, booted young fellow strode through the entrance, heels snapping sharply on the hardwood floor.

"Seen anything of Perry Norton?" he asked the clerk.

"No sir, not today," he replied. "But I was away for a couple of hours. He might have come in then."

"He phoned he'd be home by four-thirty," the newcomer said. "Perry's accurate when he says anything like that. It's going on six now. I've got to find him!"

"Perry was here this afternoon," Ora said impulsively.

"Yes?" The booted stranger whirled and came toward her. Sweeping off his hat, he revealed a brush of flaming red hair. "I'm one of Perry's cowboys. Juniper they call me," he said. "Any idea where he went from here?"

"He told me he was going to the Katydid claim," she replied, "and he left a message at the desk for me, that he'd be back. I've been waiting for him."

"Thanks, miss," Juniper said. "Now I've gotta find how to get to that place."

"I know," she said. "I heard Gopher Jake tell him."

"How do I go?" Juniper asked brusquely.

The tenseness of his tone brought apprehension to Ora's eyes. She got quickly from her chair. "You act as if something's wrong."

"Perry's been in too many jams lately. When he don't show up at home, something awful may've happened. I'm lookin' for him."

"Let me show you," she said. "Please take me with you!"

"You his girl friend?"

Ora shook her head, color rising in her cheeks. "I—I just know him a little," she said.

"Okay, sister. Let's go. Truck's just around the corner."

Leading her to the pickup he handed her in, then sprang to the driver's seat, while Ora repeated the directions Gopher had given to Perry. Juniper put the truck in gear and whirled into Main Street.

Both were silent until they had passed the Rob Roy Mine. His quick eye picked up the tracks turning to the left.

"Perry came this way," Juniper said. "His tires made them fresh marks."

Simultaneously they spied the sedan standing beyond the tipple.

Juniper shot a glance about him, his mouth drawing in grimly. "Perry was here," he muttered, "Where'd he go?"

It was Ora who spied the mass of broken and jumbled rock that filled the Katydid entrance and scattered outside, mingling with splintered timbering and fine dust.

"It looks as if that just happened," she said. "See! That little bush was broken by a sliver of stone, and the leaves are just starting to wilt."

"Cave-in!" Juniper exclaimed, the ruddy tan bleaching from his face. "My God! If Perry's in there—"

SHIVERING wtih sudden terror, Ora called loudly and clearly, "Perry! Perry! Oh, *Perry!*"

They stood motionless.

"I hear him!" she cried, a sob catching in her throat. "He's in there."

"Where? I can't hear anything," Juniper said doubtfully.

Ora pointed at a sort of crevice in the mass filling the tunnel mouth. "You can't see anything, but his voice came from there," she said breathlessly. She called again, putting her face close to the irregular aperture.

"I heard him then!" Juniper exclaimed excitedly. He shouted back, "Perry! We'll get you out. Can you hear me?"

"Yes," the reply came faintly. "Hurry!"

"Can you drive?" When Ora assented, Juniper ordered, "Take Perry's car—it handles easier—and get to the sheriff as fast as you can. Cope will know what to do and how to get men here quick."

Before he finished she was racing for the car. Ora hadn't driven much but she swung the sedan around and pressed recklessly on the gas pedal. Downhill, over a grade she tore, finally whirling into Main Street on two wheels. Nearing Colorado Street she slowed, but turning the corner and getting started up the steep grade baffled her. The engine stalled.

Ignoring the fact that the car was blocking traffic, she jumped out, glanced up the street and decided it was too far to the jail. Turning the other way, she raced over the uneven sidewalk to the hardware store and through the doorway. Howard turned from the nails he was weighing to give her an amazed look.

"Quick!" she gasped. "Get the sheriff and men! His mine's caved in and Perry Norton's under the rocks!"

"You sure?" Howard asked sternly, grasping her by the shoulders and holding her gaze.

"Yes. Juniper and I were up there. The Katydid," she panted. "He said tell the sheriff. It was easier to come here."

Before she had finished, Howard was at the telephone giving the sheriff's number. A few words explained the situation. "Yes," he said, "I'll phone all those men and take 'em in my truck."

Without hanging up the receiver he called several more numbers, gave crisp statements and asked the men to report immediately to the hardware store. Then he turned back to Ora. She stood straight and motionless, as he had left her, as if she felt that holding herself taut would hasten the rescue of Perry.

"Now," Howard told her, "let's have what you know about this business."

Ora complied, her voice steady as she related the various incidents.

"Perry may have been in the tunnel two or three hours, but the boys will get him out all right," he assured her. "Here they come now."

Turning to meet them, he seemed to forget Ora's presence. She went slowly into the street to stand watching the men come on the run to dive into the waiting truck. Some carried picks and shovels. Howard brought others from the store, locked the door and sprang into the driver's seat. Then they were off, up the street and around the corner, leaving an oppressive stillness behind them.

ORA CROSSED to the hotel with dragging feet. She shook as if a chill had gripped her.

Most of the lobby chairs were filled. Their occupants were either relaxing after their evening meal or before it. Lavita Mears gave Ora a curious look then came to meet her.

"What's the excitement?" she asked. "I saw you leaping from a car and running madly down the street."

She listened with growing interest as Ora told her of the cave-in and Perry Norton's imprisonment in the mine tunnel. Erk Streeter was coming down the stairs. Lavita turned with one of her easy, catlike movements.

"Listen to this, Erk!" she exclaimed, hastily repeating what Ora had told her.

He lifted a hand to suppress a yawn, blinking slightly as if he had just wakened.

"Can't that young fellow keep out of trouble?" he asked. "He's as active as a comic strip character."

"It's not his fault," Ora retorted.

Streeter lifted his lids to give her an alert, open-eyed look. A slight smile tugged at a corner of his mouth. "He's lucky to have such a defender," he said. "Norton might have been killed in this mine accident if you hadn't found him."

Ora supposed that Streeter meant all right but his words sent a cold wave over her. Perry's voice had sounded so weak. And he had told Juniper to hurry. Recalling that, fear sprang into new life. What if the rocks kept settling and smothered him before rescue could reach him!

She washed and dressed hastily. She had to go back to the Katydid. Supper was out of the question, and her room was so small the walls seemed to be closing in on her.

Her window opened on Colorado Street. Through it she heard an unusual activity of cars, all of which seemed to turn out of town toward the mine. She noticed that Perry's car was gone. Someone must have moved it from where she'd left it blocking traffic. She had no idea what had become of it.

She ran downstairs to the lobby desk.

"Mr. Royce, how can I get somebody to take me out to the Katydid?" she asked.

"It may be a long, tiresome wait while they open the entrance," he said. "The news will be brought to town the instant they break through to Norton."

"I want to go," she said firmly. "If you can't suggest somebody who'll drive me, I'll walk."

"By no means!" he exclaimed emphatically. "My clerk can take over here. I'll take you," he said, giving her a concerned look. "Get a jacket or coat. The nights are cool at this elevation, you know."

When they turned into the trail to the Katydid and January mines, she saw lights in every direction. Cars were scattered over the more level ground near the abandoned mines, and she could see the crowd that formed a semicircle around the Katydid entrance, which was lighted by flares.

As she stepped to the ground she heard the hum of many voices in the lowered, solemn tones associated with disaster. Near a pile of rocks a temporary kitchen had been set up, and she smelled coffee.

ROYCE took her arm and went with Ora as she made her way into the circle of watchers. She could hear the clash and clang of pick and shovel, and orders in a man's voice. When she got close enough to watch the movements of the rescue party it seemed to her they had made very little progress.

"They'll never get him out!" she exclaimed.

"They will," a woman beside her said. "Barney Cope's bossing them and he knows just how to handle a cave-in. He used to work in the mines when he was young. You can't be too quick or you'd bring down a lot more stuff. They don't know where Norton is. He might not be in the clear, you know."

"Don't you want to sit in the car?" Royce asked Ora.

"No," she replied. "I want to watch. But you needn't wait for me—please don't."

"I prefer to stay," he assured her.

The crew of diggers halted occasionally while Cope or Howard or Juniper shouted some message to Perry. During one of these halts, Cope shouted several times.

Word ran through the crowd, "Norton didn't answer that time."

"Maybe the poor fellow's gone," the woman beside Ora said.

She felt herself swaying. The sounds of pick and shovel seemed vague and far away. Then an arm was about her and she was being half-led, half-carried from the closely packed semicircle of watchers.

In a moment, Royce's voice said. "Sit down here. Now, lean back and don't move while I'm gone. I won't be long."

She wasn't so dizzy now, and the scene was coming back into focus. She was leaning against a low, gravel bank with a sideway view of the tunnel entrance. She couldn't close her hot, staring eyes, and her breath came in gasping sighs.

Her life had never held anybody who really belonged to her. But from the moment of meeting Perry she had sensed a bond that seemed constantly to strengthen. His voice was in her ears now, as it had sounded when he spoke the words of their compact. He would always come when she needed him, he had promised. The words, spoken lightly, had held a serious undertone. And Ora had felt less alone since. Each day Perry had been a little more in her thoughts.

She didn't care if people guessed how she felt about him. Nothing seemed to matter except that he was shut away in that mass of rocks and he no longer answered.

She didn't notice Royce's returning steps.

"Poor child, you're shivering with cold," he said gently, wrapping a blanket about her.

"I brought that from the car," he said and again there was comfort in his quiet, controlled voice. "Now you're tucked up snug. And here's a cup of coffee—drink it before it cools."

The steaming liquid sent a wave of warmth through her body, and it was easier to control her sobbing breath.

"Sure you don't want to go back to town?" Royce asked.

"No," Ora replied. "I can't go until—until they find him."

"I won't be far away." Royce's voice was suddenly uneven. "Stay here and keep wrapped up."

He was gone with startling abruptness. But Ora gave little thought to his manner, except that he had been remarkably kind to her. Her thoughts were with Perry and the men toiling to free him.

Once some people passed her. "Doc Crawford's standing by," one said, "and they've got the pulmotor ready. They'll save him if there's a chance."

The clink of metal against rock went on and on. Every once in a while she heard Juniper shout.

"They think Perry may be able to hear, if he can't answer," Royce told her on one of his trips to make sure she was all right.

After a period that seemed endless the watchers stirred, a ripple of excited exclamations running through the crowd. "They see him!" somebody yelled.

Ora leaped to her feet and ran towards the entrance. Royce met her halfway, took her hand and pulled it through his arm.

"Yes," he said. "They can see him. But it'll take a little more work before anybody can get close to him. He seems to be enclosed in a kind of nest of timbers."

"Move back, you fellows!" the sheriff ordered the crowd that was pushing in close. He gave Royce and Ora a quick nod of permission to hold their place.

THE GROUP of dirt-smeared, sweat-soaked men who had done the digging stood in the newly braced entrance. Ora saw Juniper, another man close behind him, crawling between crossed timbers to a huddled figure on the tunnel floor.

When they carried Perry into the open, somebody lifted a triumphant shout. But not until she heard Juniper say, "He's alive!" did Ora's tension relax.

Then the doctor announced, "He's coming out of it. No bones broken. A salty bronc could have damaged him worse." His further words weren't quite clear, something about shock and lack of air. Ora's attention was momentarily taken by an exchange of low-voiced talk between the sheriff and J. P. Howard.

"The boys began to say right off that wasn't any cave-in," J. P. said. "Some of those timbers were exploded to matchsticks and the rock pulverized.

"A neat job of dynamiting," Cope declared. "But who in hell would wanta blow up the old tunnel entrance?"

"It was to nobody's advantage," J. P. replied, "as far as I can see."

"And how'd Perry come to go in there when it was about to go off?"

"Dunno. When he can talk we may learn something," J. P. said. "But look at what I picked up over to the right of the tunnel."

Ora hardly dared move for fear she would call attention to the fact that she could hear. But she ventured to turn her head and caught the gleam of light on the head of a hand ax the sheriff was examining closely.

"See what's carved in the handle?"

"Yes." The sheriff's voice was hard. "S-p-a-r-r-o-w," he spelled slowly. "That's Ace Sparrow's ax. And he's the slickest guy with dynamite any place around here. You seen him tonight?"

"Nope."

"Okay, keep quiet about this, J. P., till I look him up and Perry can talk."

Ora exchanged a glance with Royce, and he laid a finger against his lips. Then Juniper's emphatic voice drew her attention.

"Nossir!" he exclaimed vehemently. "You can come along, Doc, but Perry's not going any place but straight to the ranch. He's rousing, you said so. That's what *he'll* want. I won't leave him no place in Midas. I can smell something about this cave-in, and it sure isn't good."

The sheriff moved quickly to Juniper's side.

"Huh?" Juniper ejaculated, as Cope said something to him. "Okay, I won't talk no more *now*."

A moment later he left the group beside Perry and came loping over to Ora. "He's going to be okay, lady," he said. "You don't hafta worry now. I'll tell him how you pretty near wrecked yourself racing to get help for 'im."

HIS RED hair was dark and heavy with grit, his face dirt smeared, but Ora flung her arms about his neck and pressed her cheek against his. "Oh, Juniper!" she exclaimed. "If it hadn't been for *you*—" she broke off, releasing him with a radiant smile, and adding, "Thanks, I won't worry now."

Ora and Royce rode back silently to town. Both were exhausted, but Royce seemed more than tired. His face was

grey with pallor, and his eyes were sunk deep in their sockets.

When Ora at last got back to her room, she saw the early dawn light coming through the window. Not much time for sleep before the morning rehearsal but that didn't seem important.

Picking up a bunch of mail she had tossed on the dresser the previous afternoon in her haste to meet Perry, she looked at it more closely. One letter she had first thought an advertising circular was from the firm of attorneys in Kansas City who had handled her father's business. She tore open the envelope eagerly.

First she hurried to read the firm letter, laying its enclosure aside.

My dear Miss Fortune:

In accordance with our promise to you on your visit to our office some weeks ago, we made a thorough search of the personal files of our deceased colleague, Joseph Tilden, who had complete charge of your father's affairs. We found the enclosed letter from your father, which we are enclosing.

Another matter has been disclosed by our search. At different times after the initial sum was placed in Mr. Tilden's hands to be invested for your support, other sums of varying amounts were sent to him to be added to the original. These came from several banks, and there is no record of their sender.

We beg to inform you that the small fund remaining in our hands has been reinvested to somewhat better advantage, but it will not suffice for your support.

Ora didn't wait to read the concluding paragraph of farewell. She opened the letter written by her father, whose handwriting was strange to her. The script was regular and as legible as print. It read:

Dear Joe:

Thanks for remembering our boyhood friendship and agreeing to my request that you handle certain confidential matters. You have agreed to see that the child is properly cared for and educated, and to administer the fund for that purpose. Under no circumstances is she to be told anything of her background or parents, save the fact that both are dead.

Her name is Ora Fortune. The first we chose as a feminine version of this country's word for gold, which her hair is, pure gold. She will be a child of Fortune, hence the last name. I hope it may prove an omen for good.

The accompanying locket belonged to her mother, whose picture I have put inside. That much heritage I want her to have, the knowledge of her mother's loveliness.

Thank you, Joe, and good-by.

P. R. H.

Without its envelope, there was no way of discovering the date of its mailing nor from whence it had been sent. She had been told her birth date, that she was born in Mexico and brought into the United States when she was a few months old. Previously she had supposed this was on the death of her parents.

Few as were the words in the letter, they suggested so much that her thoughts were chaos. Hadn't her father died? Might he be alive now? And why had he given her up so completely—refused to permit her any knowledge of her background, of either father or mother? She could imagine only one reason, that he had committed a crime and faced detection and imprisonment.

He must have loved me very much, she decided, to take such thought for my protection.

WHEN it was certain that Perry Norton had not been seriously injured, the watchers of his rescue turned homeward. Only the sheriff and his special deputy remained to make a careful examination of the ground for some distance around the Katydid entrance.

"Too many folks tramped around here to find anything now," Howard said.

"You found the ax," Cope declared.

Both men were silent until the sheriff called from the old tipple. "Look there!" he said, when Howard stepped cautiously inside the ruin. "Somebody stood there for some time. Didn't leave no clear footprints, but it shows he scuffed around awful restless. He could see through that wide crack right down the road and through the other hole get a view of the tunnel opening. He'd know the minute anybody stepped inside it."

"You think—" Howard began.

"I think the guy who set off that dynamite was hidden in here," the sheriff broke in. "He meant to get Perry."

"Why?"

"Why any of the things that have been happening around here?" Cope snapped.

"I found something, too," Howard said, leading the way to the far side of the tipple. There was enough light now to see the marks of two cars that had stood there. One, with a patched tire, had been driven away in the direction of a thicket of brush. Going on to that, they saw that the automobile had been maneuvered into a concealed nook, then backed out. "I don't say it was Sparrow's old jalopy," Howard went on, "but I do know that he had Cal patch a tire last week."

"I'll look Sparrow up as soon's I get some breakfast," Cope said. "He's gone downhill lately, hanging around Pickle's place and drinking. He might have got into mischief, though I swear I can't see how he would have it in for Perry or would have any reason to blow up the Katydid."

An hour later Barney Cope braked his car to a stop outside the shack where Ace Sparrow lived alone. His car wasn't in the yard and the cabin was empty. Opening the unlocked door, the sheriff went inside. It was obvious that the owner had not slept there the previous night. With no neighbors in sight of the place, there was nobody to question regarding when Ace had last been seen there.

In town no one recalled seeing Sparrow since the morning before. Don Pickle's saloon wasn't open for business but Cope routed the proprietor out of his living quarters.

"Yep," he said readily. "Ace was in my place around noon yesterday. He was feeling good. After he had a couple he told me he'd just got a swell job. You know he hasn't worked much this spring, only some little paint jobs like he done for Streeter on the Gold Pan. I asked him, 'What is it you're going to do?' Ace just chuckled and said 'Never mind. It's good and when I get my pay, mebbe I'll take a little vacation trip.' That's all I know about him, and the last time I saw him."

Returning to his office, Cope telephoned to several nearby towns in all of which Barney and his old car were well known. Nobody had seen him recently.

"That feller's always around when I don't need to see him," Cope thought. "Where in hell has he got to?"

That information the sheriff had within an hour. Some boy starting for a hike in the hills took a road no longer in use. A section of it had washed into a deep, steep-sided gully on one side. There they spied the wreckage of a car. It was Sparrow's and he was inside. He had been dead for many hours. And in the car pocket was a shattered whiskey bottle. The inference was that he had been headed for home, was drunk and got off on the wrong road.

Ringing the Talbot Ranch, the sheriff learned that Perry had just wakened. He came to the phone.

"No," he said. "I don't know a thing except that I was in the tunnel and the roof fell in. I hadn't seen a soul around the place."

To Cope's further questions he replied that he had never quarreled with Sparrow and hardly knew the fellow by sight. It wasn't easy to convince Perry that the cave-in had been caused by dynamite deliberately set off.

"You're as bad as Juniper," he told the sheriff. "I just don't believe anybody is out to get me. That's flat. This stuff is all accidental."

Another phone call brought J. P. Howard to Cope's office.

"A lot of folks drop into your store in the course of a day," Cope said. "I want you to get something into circulation for me, as fast as you can. Put over that I'm satisfied that Sparrow planted that dynamite in the Katydid and blew up the tunnel. Tell about finding his ax there, and the tire marks. He's been drinking much more than usual, and I think he got to brooding over the old mines being bought up by outsiders and it gave him a queer brain kink. It isn't sensible, but it's an idea I might think a drunk would get."

"And do you?" Howard asked, tugging thoughtfully at his substantial nose.

"Hell, no!" Cope exploded. "I want folks to believe I do. If anybody else is mixed up in it, I'd like to have 'em think

I'm not doing any more investigating. Get it?"

"Yep," Howard returned. "I'll start it going. But who do you s'pose is mixed up in it?"

"Do your own guessin', Deputy Howard," Cope retorted.

THE AFTERNOON stretching ahead of her seemed endless to Ora. There was the usual let-down after extreme excitement. And it was depressing to know she could not look forward to Perry's coming in. She wanted to talk with him about the letter from her father. She knew nobody else in Midas well enough to discuss personal matters with.

A knock on her door was a welcome interruption to solitary thinking over and over the same questioning thoughts. Lavita Mears smiled from the threshold.

"Erk's loaned me his car for the afternoon," she said. "Let's go for a ride."

Ora hesitated. She wasn't sure she wanted to go with Lavita.

"Oh, come on," she urged. "Do you good. I thought we'd take a whirl out to Perry Norton's place. It'll be fun to call on the hero of so many narrow escapes, like going to see a movie star. Wouldn't you like to know how he is, after the great mine disaster?"

It was a temptation. Impulsively Ora agreed.

When the girls drove into the ranch yard, Perry was perched on a corral fence watching Juniper work over a young black horse that seemed possessed of the fabled seven devils. Glimpsing the snappy roadster and its occupants, Juniper nearly lost his knee grip on the bundle of steel muscles. Perry jumped from the fence, brushing at his wind-ruffled hair with one hand and fastening the top button of his shirt with the other.

"This is a surprise!" he exclaimed. "Why didn't you let me know you were coming? I could have had afternoon tea."

He gave Lavita a bantering glance that matched his tone, but the look that went straight and quick into Ora's eyes made her catch her breath.

"It's lots more fun to surprise folks," Lavita said with an upward sweep of her lacquer-black lashes. "Especially men." Her slow smile which included Juniper, made that red-headed cowboy blink. "And," she went on, "I don't care for tea, it's too weak. My taste is for strong drinks—and people."

Lavita practically took over the conversation. No, they wouldn't go into the house, it was much too nice out of doors. Couldn't they take a walk over to the creek? It looked fascinating.

Perry glanced at the porch where Bill Duffy was sitting on the edge of his chair watching the two girls. He'd be disappointed if they didn't come over to see him.

Presently Lavita said, "Did that man from Chicago go away without buying your mine?"

"He went, but he's coming back," Perry replied, "but it hasn't been proved yet that it is my mine."

"You mean there's a question?" she exclaimed. "How dreadful, if it proved not to be." She was watching him between the long, shining lashes now.

"Oh, I don't know," Perry said indifferently. "Since last night I haven't any use for the place. It's dismal." He grinned. "Give me this—" he waved a hand over the panorama of the valley and shallow ridges hemming it in—"and I'll let somebody else have the holes in the ground."

"I sort of like the idea of a gold mine," Lavita commented, "maybe because it's a kind of gamble. And I've got that blood in my veins." Her face was serious now and she gave Perry a direct look.

"That so?" he said.

"Yes, my father liked the pasteboards," she returned, "too well to please my mother's people. They ran away to be married."

She had his interest now, but Perry didn't look very happy.

"Yes," she went on, "they went to Mexico."

"Oh!" Ora exclaimed. "Were you born there?"

Lavita nodded. "In Chihuahua, I believe. I've been looking into my early history a bit lately."

Perry's face went wooden. "With results?" he asked quietly.

"Some," she said, "and I'm expecting important ones directly." She changed the subject abruptly, returning to her usual line of banter.

Ora was mostly silent. A girl couldn't go into competition with Lavita without making a real fight of it. There was no kitten softness about her, despite her youth and the purr in her voice. She was all claws, ready to unsheathe them at a second's notice.

WHEN they were getting in the car, he said, "Tomorrow I have to make a trip to pick up some heifers I bought from a fellow. I'll be home late, so you won't see me in town until the next day."

Ora knew the words were meant for her and flashed him a smile. But a shadow of disappointment darkened the blue of her eyes.

He watched the girls driving away, with a thoughtful frown. He knew very well that Lavita wasn't making a play for him, even if she had demanded all his attention during the visit. That was her way with men. But he had a definite impression that there had been a purpose behind her visit to the ranch. Could it be possible that she wanted to put over to him the fact that her father was a gambler and that she had been born in Chihuahua? It was too much of a coincidence to make him feel comfortable.

As he had told her, the mine meant little to him, though he could have made good use of the cash it might bring in the projected sale. But Lavita was Erk Streeter's girl, and he was a gambler. It seemed a shabby trick of fate that, should she prove to be Virginia Talbot's daughter, Lavita would inherit and share the very property its original owner would have hated to see pass into the hands of such a man.

A further thought gave him a distinct jolt. If he'd been killed in the mine tunnel cave-in, wouldn't Mathias Talbot's granddaughter, if alive, have inherited the Talbot Ranch?

"What a damned mix-up!" he exclaimed, whirling on his heel and striding towards the house.

"Well!" Bill Duffy exclaimed, giving Perry a sour look as he approached the porch. "So you wouldn't let your company come and speak to me. I s'pose you was afraid I'd say some more about Lavita looking like Virginia."

"No," Perry said. "She didn't want to come to the house. And that's a girl that does exactly as she pleases." Perry's tone was hard. "How you got the idea that she's sweet, beats me. If that girl is like Talbot's daughter, I'd say he was well rid of her."

"Shut up!" Bill snapped. "I won't listen to no talk that casts a reflection on Virginia. Anybody that knew her'll tell you she was the little queen of these Midas hills."

"Take it easy, Bill," Perry said, giving the old man a grin. "I'll grant what you say about Talbot's daughter. I got het up because I hate to see you fool yourself when I have an idea it's a case of wishful thinking. You keep raving about her 'shining' hair. Now I've got a pretty firm idea that shine is out of a bottle, even though it looks good. When she spoke to you in the Bonanza lobby she turned on a hundred-watt charm and it made a hit. But it's my honest opinion that black-haired girl—"

"*Black!*" Duffy shouted, pounding the chair arm with a big, muscular fist. "What'n hell are you talking about?"

"Lavita Mears' hair," Perry replied.

"You're crazy," Bill said. "I never mentioned no black hair. I said 'shining' like all the gold that was ever minted, only purtier. Softer and yellower than buttercup flowers in the sunshine."

Perry gaped at him with wide eyes in which comprehension slowly dawned. Memory flashed him a picture of the old man sitting in the car, leaning back with closed eyes while he asked Perry about the girl standing near the Post Office steps. In the few seconds between Duffy seeing the girl and Perry's turning to look that way, Lavita must have come from the Post Office while Ora had gone inside. The two had simply changed places.

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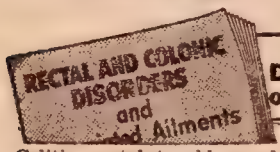

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"You're right, old-timer!" he exclaimed. "She's wonderful!"

"Now I know you're crazy," Duffy said sourly.

"Listen!" Perry said, plunging into an explanation of the misunderstanding. When he finished, they were shaking hands and grinning like a pair of Cheshire cats.

"It doesn't matter who she is," Perry said, "Ora's going to own a half interest in the Talbot Ranch any minute I can get her to say yes. To hell with her career!"

READY to leave the next morning, Perry turned back to say, "Hi, Bill, if that lawyer in Denver happens to call me, tell him to leave the message with you. He was going to wire his friend in Chihuahua and ask for information wired back, pronto."

"Sure, sure," Duffy replied, beaming. "I'll tell him and get all he knows out of him, too!"

Perry wanted to see Ora at once but common sense told him a day's delay didn't matter in the long run. By tomorrow he might have something worth while to tell her. It still was little more than a series of guesses on the part of himself and the old stage driver. Better not do too much talking without a solid foundation.

And after all the day didn't seem so long, with so much to think and speculate about. He didn't even devote a fleeting thought to Lavita—she had passed out of the picture.

The bunch were about to eat supper when Perry pulled in with his truck load of heifers. Juniper and Joe Moon came to help him unload. When he got in the house, Duffy insisted on a conference in the living room before Perry took time to clean up.

"I've got news!" he exclaimed excitedly. "Pitman called up, and he'd had a wire from his Chihuahua friend. He got hold of that doctor and the guy didn't wanta talk. But his wife gave some things away. There

was a baby girl born to Mrs. R. P. Hamilton and *her* name was Virginia. The baby lived but when an inquiry was made after word was sent to Talbot about the death of the father and mother, the doctor was paid to write back that the child had died. Pitman wired to get more information, and said you'd stand the costs. I told him to pay that son-of-a-gun of a doctor if he had to, and I've got a nest egg I'd donate with pleasure."

"Thanks," Perry said, "but I'll take care of all costs."

They had eaten and were shoving their chairs back from the table when the telephone bell jangled vigorously. Perry answered.

"Yes, this is Norton," he replied to the businesslike voice at the other end of the line. The connection wasn't too clear, but there was no mistaking the crisp tone of a man who had authority and expected to get things done.

"Quinn speaking," he said. "I expected to get in touch with you before, but was delayed. Now I'd like to see you as soon as possible. Could you come in tonight?"

"Why not early in the morning?"

"I've got to leave early for a conference in Denver, and the Chicago office wants me to wire them about a few points I must take up with you."

"Okay, I'll come," Perry said. He glanced at the clock. "Will eight-thirty be too late?"

"Not at all. And I'm not at the Bonanza Hotel this time. I've taken the old Prentiss house on Cliff Street. My secretary is with me, I have so much work to do with him that we need more room than I could get at the hotel."

"I know the place," Perry said.

"That," he said, as he turned from the phone, "was Quinn. He's making me some kind of a proposition tonight."

"Fine," Juniper declared. "It's a swell night for a ride to town. I shaved today so I only need a clean shirt."

"You don't need anything," Perry said emphatically. "You're not going."

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MYRTLE JULIETTE COREY and AUSTIN CORCORAN

While he was agreeing to Quinn's request he figured there would be a chance to catch Ora after her night rehearsal, and he had no intention of taking a watchdog.

Juniper yielded the point. "Well, I don't s'pose anybody'll have Quinn's place salted with dynamite," he said. "Guess we'll let you out alone, this time."

Duffy had gone to bed, and the two cowboys were on their way when the jangling bell of the telephone broke into their peace.

"Damn that thing, anyhow!" Juniper exclaimed, stubbing his bare toe as he made for the instrument without putting his boots on.

"Talbot Ranch? This is Long Distance." A small voice came over the wire.

"No, Norton isn't here," Juniper said. "Yes, I'll take the message. Go ahead." He listened a moment, then broke in, "Please repeat that!"

"This is Quinn, speaking from Denver."

"You mean you're Quinn, of the Big Six outfit in Chicago?"

"Yes, yes," the assent came with some impatience.

"And you're in Denver?"

"Yes." Still more impatiently.

"Mister, keep your shirt on and get what I'm saying," Juniper retorted. "You called up Perry Norton early this evening and insisted that he come into Midas and see you at once. He went. Now what the devil does *this* mean?"

"I don't know. But I'm Quinn, and I'm in the Brown Palace Hotel in Denver. Just got off a plane from Chicago. And I am not interested in jokes. Give Norton my message."

Juniper leaped to the open doorway. "Where did Perry say he was going to meet Quinn?" he demanded.

"Didn't say exactly where," Duffy replied. "I s'posed at the hotel. Why?"

"My God! Quinn isn't in Midas. Won't get here till tomorrow. *Who* did call Perry? And where did he go?"

(To be concluded in the next issue)

EDITOR'S NOTE: For 24 years Our Air Mail has been linking the readers of Ranch Romances. You may write directly to anyone whose letter is published, if you uphold the wholesome spirit of Ranch Romances. Our Air Mail is intended for those who really want correspondents. Be sure to sign your own name. Address letters for publication to Our Air Mail, Ranch Romances, 515 Madison Ave., New York 22, N. Y.

South of the Border

Dear Editor:

I live in the beautiful city of Monterrey, Mexico. I am 26, have brown eyes and hair, and I weigh only 90 pounds. I like very much the United States and the people of the States, too, and would be very glad if some nice people would write to me. I speak English, and I am still studying it.

GRACIELA CABALLERO G.
Zaragoza Norte #521
Monterrey, N. L.
Mexico

Sporting Scotsman

Dear Editor:

I would indeed feel indebted to you if you could assist in introducing me to a couple of Americans or Canadians. I am 25 years old and my interest are wide and varied. I am a Scotsman, and I am especially fond of football but I also like golf, tennis, cycling and, of course, writing letters. I would like to hear from either sex, and I assure you I will do my very best in making my replies topical and interesting.

A. STRAIN NEILSON
75 Laurel Dr.
Wishaw, Lanarkshire
Scotland

A Real Friend

Dear Editor:

I am laid up in bed due to a bad heart so letters mean so much to me. Having always been so active and full of life I find it mighty lonely here in bed. I am 38, have blue eyes and brown hair. I stand 5'11" and weigh 150 lbs. I always loved sports, hiking being one of my favorites. My chief hobby now is writing letters and collecting model horses and I promise to try to prove a real friend to anyone who writes me.

BOB HAMANN
P. O. Box 1035
Olympia, Wash.

Calling Young Marrieds

Dear Editor:

I'm not exactly lonesome but I love to write letters. I love music and I play the piano and piano accordion. I have played with a dance band. I would like to hear from people in other lands. I am 20, stand an even 5' and I have been married a year. I would especially like to hear from other young married girls. Since I lived in the city and am now living on a ranch I can tell you about either way of life. I promise to answer all letters and exchange snaps if you wish.

DONNA LEHMAN
Rushville, Nebr.

Flood Wanted

Dear Editor:

I wonder if a very lonely person who is unfortunate enough to be physically handicapped could join your column in quest of new friends. I love to write and receive letters, I like music, the movies and to watch people dancing. I am 5'8", weigh 155 lbs., have dark hair and blue eyes and am 38 years. I'll answer all the letters I receive, so come on and flood me with letters.

DENVER CHRISTIE
Box 191
Dugger, Ind.

Lady in London

Dear Editor:

How about all you boys and girls in the States and anywhere else dropping me a few lines? I'd be so very happy to hear from everyone. I am 22, have dark-brown hair and green-brown eyes. I work in London as a shorthand-typist. I promise to answer all letters received.

MURIEL STAFFORD
24 Barnfield Ave.
Shirley
Croydon, Surrey
England

Canadian Sisters

Dear Editor:

We are sisters, 15 and 16 years old who would give anything to make new friends. We live on a farm and sometimes it gets lonesome. So come on, fellows and gals, write! Send snaps if you have some.

HELEN AND MARGARET MILLER
Box 70
Mayerthorpe, Alberta
Canada

OUT OF THE CHUTES

ALONG about this time of year, there's not much chance for a cowboy to be unemployed or even to take a few days' breather between shows. In our files we have 86 rodeos listed during the month of June alone, and we wouldn't swear to it that we haven't missed one.

One that Californians in San Joaquin Valley never miss is the Visalia Annual Rodeo and Home-Coming, which will be held this year on the new rodeo site at the Visalia Municipal Airport.

The doings begin on Friday, June 3, when pioneers from that area gather for the home-coming celebration, entertaining themselves and their audience with an old fiddlers' contest and historic talks. In the afternoon contestants in the sweetheart contest are judged on horseback in Western costumes, and in the evening the same gals parade in formal clothes before the judges who are supposed to choose the lady with the most sparkling personality.

Saturday morning is parade time, and folks gather along the main streets of town to see old-time vehicles, early day costumes, silver-mounted sheriff's posses, riding groups and dozens of floats.

All this is just the build-up for the rodeo, which begins on Saturday afternoon with the grand entry on the rodeo grounds of hundreds of horsemen led by mounted colors.

The Visalia Rodeo was started in 1929, and during its history the folks around there have always been squarely behind it. They'll show off their feeling for Western spectacle by dressing up in ten-gallon hats and cowboy boots. As Charles Hammer, Rodeo Chairman puts it, "If a man has one cow he can wear cowboy boots."

From June 16-19, top-hands of the ranges will gather in Salinas, Calif., for the 33rd time since 1911. We hear that this year's show will surpass all others in competition, prize money and attendance.

This one is called the California rodeo, and they really have a worth while brag, as far as prize money is concerned. In 1948 the purses (including cowboys' entry fees) totaled nearly $45,000. The Rodeo Association President, Gene Dayton, tells us that this year he expects that the prize money will be even greater.

"This means," he said, "that contestants will be battling for over $11,000 daily—the largest purses on a day-to-day basis offered by any rodeo in the country."

People in Salinas, like folks all over the West, find a rodeo is a good excuse for a big civic celebration. The Governor will be there and other city and state dignitaries, plus a lot of movie and radio stars, everyone joining in the local fun of recreating the days of the Old West and the times of the early Spanish settlers.

As a matter of fact, some of the participants in the celebration are descendants of the soldiers and civilians who came to northern California when the Franciscan padres built California's famous chain of 21 missions to civilize the Indians.

All this ought to be about enough attractions to satisfy anybody, but there'll also be a chance for folks to see a group of people whose names are better known than their faces. A Press Day (June 17) has been set aside to entertain the 250 newspaper editors and publishers from the East who are now touring the nation by special train.

But the cowboys, of course, are the guests of honor, and to list all the top-hands who will try to take home a slice of

the $45,000 would just be to list Who's Who in the rodeo arena. The California Rodeo is a likely spot for folks to see the big names.

DAMARIS GOEHRING, who gave us such a colorful account of last fall's activities in southern California, has come up with another installment of her "Horse Capades."

"Most of the horses in this part of the country were working the last week-end in March," she says.

"The Junior Hunt and Jumper Club put on a fine show at Strickland Park, and the youngsters showed off some fine Western horsemanship and flat saddle feats, and marked themselves for future big-time fame and trophies.

"There was plenty of color at the Gilmore rodeo, beginning with the grand entry, which was led by Grand Marshall Bill Hopper, and included many other famous parade riders. Folks got an eyeful of the Silver Glen Vaqueros, who won the prize for the best mounted group, the Shadowettes in the stunning bright blue and red uniforms, who were chosen the best women's drill team. Local amateur cowboys competed in the rodeo which followed, getting their experience the hard way.

"World champion cowboys congregated at the Red Mountain Rodeo near Victorville for a real cowtown contest. Wag Blesing (of whom we Burbank folks are very proud) won the saddle bronc event. Cotton Rose won bull riding, and Bud Spealman and Ike Thomas split first for bareback money. Bulldogging was won by "Salinas" Vanderlinten and Vern Castro took the calf-roping honors.

"Local women riders made news at Caliente's Powder Puff Derby. Mrs. Clyde Kennedy (Phyllis Cannon of rodeo and national jumping fame) came out on top, and she with Polly Burson, Pat North and Evelyn Findley then made plans to compete in April in the Belles and Beaus race against four men jockeys.

"Proving that most horsemen would rather ride than watch others perform, around 400 joined with the San Fernando Horse Owners Association in their 2nd annual San Fernando Mission Restoration Benefit ride. The proceeds, as you might guess, go toward the restoration of the original old adobe mission. In full Western attire the group rode dirt the full 18 miles of the trek—along power lines, back country roads and dry washes.

"They were met inside the grounds by the Mission Fathers, who performed the blessing of the horsemen. The riders were then served a sumptuous and typical early California dinner in the original mission patio. Movie cameras ground, and cameras of picture magazine photographers clicked to recapture the colorful scene on film."

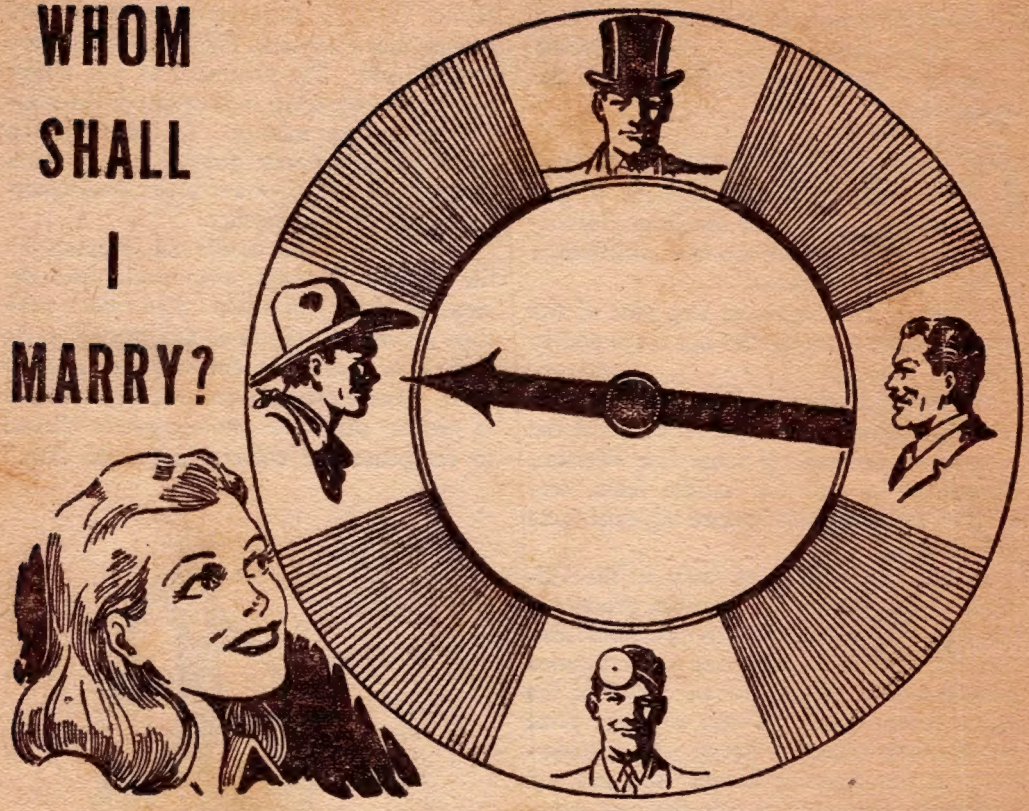
Trick Roping in Two Sizes

We know our readers enjoy these first-hand accounts of modern horsemanship activities, and we'll be glad to hear from groups all over the West about their doings during the summer and their plans for the rest of the year. Address letters to Out of The Chutes, c/o RANCH ROMANCES, 515 Madison Ave., New York City 22.

Adios,

THE EDITORS

WHOM SHALL I MARRY?



By Professor Marcus Mari

Man of Gemini — *May 21 to June 21*

THE SIGN OF Gemini, which means "twins," gives its men several personalities. The Gemini man is many men in one. (This has nothing to do with the fact that the Dionne quints were born under this sign!) Some of the famous men of Gemini are Brigham Young, Jimmy Walker, Conan Doyle, Richard Strauss, Kay Kyser, Errol Flynn and Paul Lukas.

Unless something unusual ties the Gemini man down in early life, he'll roam. He wants to see everything, and do everything. He's so versatile that he's quite capable of accomplishing this too. He has a flexibility about him that permits him with equal grace and ability to be the lowliest cowpuncher one day and the haughtiest ranch owner the next. He can carry any rôle well. He has a great deal of natural ability, and is inclined to toss it to the winds in all directions rather than funnel his talents into one career.

All his life he'll have to be wary of romances. His affability is sometimes misconstrued for real interest. Once tossed by a big romance, the Gemini man is attentive, kindly, demonstrative. He's everything a girl could want. Her big problem will be how to hold him in the saddle. He should marry the kind of girl who'll ride along with him, who doesn't mind pulling up stakes, and who isn't fearful of the future. His mate may have some desperate moments, but one thing is sure—she'll never be bored with her Gemini man!

You may receive a personal reading by sending this coupon to Professor Marcus Mari in care of Ranch Romances, 515 Madison Ave., New York 22, N. Y. ENCLOSE STAMPED AND SELF-ADDRESSED ENVELOPE. (Canadians enclose 3 cents instead of stamp.)

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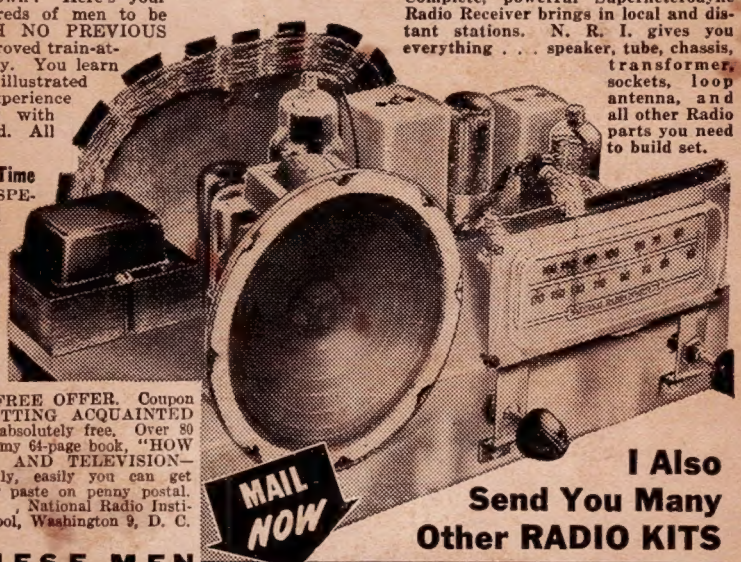

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FOOT ITCH

ATHLETE'S FOOT

DISEASE OFTEN MISUNDERSTOOD

The cause of the disease is not a germ as so many people think, but a vegetable growth that becomes buried beneath the outer tissues of the skin.

To obtain relief the medicine to be used should first gently dissolve or remove the outer skin and then kill the vegetable growth.

This growth is so hard to kill that a test shows it takes 15 minutes of boiling to destroy it; however, laboratory tests also show that H. F. will kill it upon contact in 15 seconds.

DOUBLE ACTION NEEDED

Recently H. F. was developed solely for the purpose of relieving Athlete's Foot. It both gently dissolves the skin and then kills the vegetable growth upon contact. Both actions are necessary for prompt relief.

H. F. is a liquid that doesn't stain. You just paint the infected parts nightly before going to bed. Often the terrible itching is relieved at once.

H. F. SENT ON FREE TRIAL

Sign and mail the coupon, and a bottle of H. F. will be mailed you immediately. Don't send any money and don't pay the postman any money; don't pay anything any time unless H. F. is helping you. If it does help you, we know you will be glad to send us $1 for the bottle at the end of ten days. That's how much faith we have in H. F. Read, sign and mail the coupon today.

PAY NOTHING TILL RELIEVED

Send Coupon

At least 50% of the adult population of the United States are being attacked by the disease known as Athlete's Foot.

Usually the disease starts between the toes. Little watery blisters form, and the skin cracks and peels. After a while, the itching becomes intense, and you feel as though you would like to scratch off all the skin.

BEWARE OF IT SPREADING

Often the disease travels all over the bottom of the feet. The soles of your feet become red and swollen. The skin also cracks and peels, and the itching becomes worse and worse.

Get relief from this disease as quickly as possible, because it is both contagious and infectious, and it may go to your hands or even to the under arm or crotch of the legs.

GORE PRODUCTS, Inc. N. F.

823 Perdido St., New Orleans, La.

Please send me immediately a bottle of H. F. for foot trouble as described above. I agree to use it according to directions. If at the end of 10 days my feet are getting better, I will send you $1. If I am not entirely satisfied, I will return the unused portion of the bottle to you within 15 days from the time I receive it.

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